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A Complete Bat Jennison Novel By George Bruce Marquis

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Vol. XXVI. No. VII

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UNDER THE SETTING SUN

TRAPPING BEAVER

THE great beaver lure was castorem, an oily, odorous, brownish-red secretion of their own; and also the dried follicles containing this secretion, known as musk stones, which passed for currency among the trappers and were worth nearly as much as the beaver skins. The lure was made by mixing the castorem with an extract from the bark of the roots of the spice bush. The making of the essence was a valuable secret and the older experts among the trappers often sold the secret for large sums of money to the younger men. When a trapper had no castorem he often made a bait from the fresh roots of the sassafras or spice bush, or from a mixture of spice roots and whiskey. If the true essence were well prepared it was claimed that beaver would scent it at a mile and sooner or later head for it.

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The stick was fastened to the trap with a horse-hair line so the beaver would pull it into and under the water during his struggles and not leave it exposed to attract other beavers and take them from other ready traps. The beaver, hunting for the essence, had to climb up on the bank to get it; and to do this he must pass over the open trap, which usually caught him by a foreleg. To the trap was attached an iron chain about two yards long, and to this was fastened a fifteen or twenty foot line, its other end securely anchored out in the stream and in deep water if it was to be found. As the beaver struggled to escape, the trap worked into deeper water and in most cases the victim was drowned.

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THE VALLEY OF

I

ONE moment Bat Jennison was fathoms deep in sleep, the next he was awake, every sense and faculty tuned to the utmost peak of efficiency. Yet for ten ticks of a watch he still lay there, eyes fixed on the shapeless pattern etched on the blue sky by the motionless leaves above him while he listened intently. For, drumming through his brain were the lingering echoes of a cry of anguish, muffled by distance, choked with terror, its place of origin still unknown. Then he stripped the blankets away swiftly, belted on his guns, picked up his Winchester and was ready. Ready for what?

The answer to that tantalizing question lay in that muffled, strangling sound which had reft him of sleep. And it was not to be found in that little grove of trees nested there against the towering granite wall. No! His five comrades still gripped in slumber had not brought forth that cry. Dissonant sounds they made, indeed, chorded to scale all the way from Whispering Thompson's diapason snoring to Old

BAT JENNISON

In a Complete Novel by

George Bruce Marquis

SILENT DEATH

Bud Wiley's flutelike burblings. Levitt, always the gentleman, did not snore. That auditory diagnosis made in lightninglike way, Jennison turned to the open prairie for enlightenment —and found it, though for a long moment he doubted.

Out there he was viewing a strange relay race; a man in the lead, a dog trailing. A gap that seemed twenty feet separated the two when Jennison first glimpsed them, a gap that lessened even as he stared. Though the dog merely trotted, there was something menacing in that unhurried soft-footed pace that sent a chill skidding up Jennison's spine. And yet he hesitated. Could it be that the man was running from this dog that moved methodically almost at his heels? Rather did the master not flee from some as yet unseen peril, his faithful companion attending naturally as his rear guard?

Sweat started on Jennison's forehead and his finger fidgeted on the trigger of his rifle. Then the man resolved all doubts. His head wagged over his shoulder, his stumbling feet gave way utterly, while from his laboring chest there issued a wailing, hopeless cry.

EVEN before it reached Jennison's ears he had acted. Flashing his Winchester to his shoulder, he fired. The dog plowed to his knees, yet in seemingly purposeful way his muzzle pushed on and on until it nestled against the man's outstretched foot.

Behind Jennison flared up a sudden hubbub as his five companions, jarred rudely from peaceful sleep by the crash of his Winchester, roared out questions and larded them well with startled oaths. With the medley of unheeded sounds pounding on his ear drums, Jennison stepped toward the strange pair stretched at his feet so grotesquely on the flat prairie, while his friends sprang from bed in disorderly fashion and stood with Jennison by the mystery. That the man was alive needed no second glance to prove, but that he had collapsed from utter exhaustion was equally clear. His face covered with a short black beard was a mask of blood, a heavy hemorrhage from both nostrils very plainly the source. Yes, the man was living but not so the dog. Jennison's bullet had plowed through his body and if it had missed the heart it was by way of being a miracle. Yet Jennison very distinctly had seen the dog crawl forward after the fatal shot. Not only had he edged himself forward but his jaws were even now clamped on the man's boot heel!

From what he now realized all too clearly, Jennison recoiled. He pointed silently to the dog, his gripping jaws and muzzle a-lather with foam.

"Mad dog!" Steve Donaldson exclaimed in hushed tones. "Did he bite him, Bat?"

"Nothin' but his boot heel, I figger," Jennison answered. Then in clipped sentences he told his story. Always the physician, Levitt stooped down to examine the unconscious man. Presently he looked up.

THE profuse hemorrhage from the nostrils probably saved him," he explained. "Otherwise he might have ruptured a blood vessel internally and died." Then he glanced at the spume-flecked muzzle of the dead dog. "Hydrophobia," he diagnosed. After a moment he added, "A terrible death and one apparently he has escaped, thanks to Bat's skill and intuition. For I call it intuition. Who but Bat would have realized that tragedy was hidden behind that seeming race? Who but Bat could have killed the dog with that sudden single shot?"

Jennison was unconscious of Levitt's sincere praise. He had been observing a group of horsemen. They were riding across the valley straight from the west, that is to say, at right angles to the creek, and headed straight for the camp. Jennison arose to meet them, whether friend, foe or neutral, while his five comrades ranged themselves within touching distance of his doughty back.

Six men there were in the group, well mounted, well armed, the leader a yard or so in advance on a powerful roan gelding. As they rode leisurely nearer, Jennison observed that the leader was smiling. No half-baked immature smile this, but a whole-hearted smile, evidenced by a full display of dazzling teeth. This, Jennison's first impression, abated with sudden sureness. Not much. That line of flashing ivory did not register humorous emotions on the part of the leader. He flaunted the badge of good will without power to evade its accepted implications. He smiled because his upper lip was absent, sheared away by the teeth of a hard-pressed antagonist in some bygone battle. Someway it was a discovery that worked in them an odd defensive reaction. That eternal smile might be the hall mark of a kindly, genial man or it might masquerade before a soul ruthless, cruel, brutal and utterly debased.

A dozen yards away they drew rein and the leader dismounted, confronted Jennison and his friends, and without salutation either of hand or voice addressed them. There is no other way to

describe that almost set and formal speech, couched in an even level tone in which the labials were strangely slurred due to his missing lip.

"Gentlemen," he said as if instructing a primer class, "you're strangers here and ought to remain strangers. The quarrel in this valley should be no concern of yours. If you're wise, you'll break camp and return the way you came, to Soames' Bar. And THAT'S advice you can't afford to neglect. You might get a few of Bacon Wingate's dollars, but you'll also get a back load of his own self-made troubles."

II

HE PAUSED as if to observe the effect of his words, but if he expected instant concurrence in what amounted to a tacit command, he was foredoomed to disappointment. Jennison, hazy as to the general drift of this veiled warning, sparred for information a bit more concrete.

"How much," he queried, as if the matter were of vital interest, "do you reckon this said Engate man you mention with minus respect, would be willin' to pay us, say per day, fur holdin' up his end of this argument? You see," he added cheerfully, "me and my pards is jest plain washed-out prospectors who run outen grub, nuggets, gold dust and such trifles. And besides, you mentioned Soames' Bar."

Their interviewer ran an expert eye over the six men equipped as they were for war and likely with a disposition to commit it. Prospectors indeed! Fighting men, skilled, hard and courageous, possibly for hire, so he read them and in his reading erred in part.

"Prospectors!" he smiled, if a lipless man can smile. "You go well heeled for pick and shovel men. As for Bacon WINGATE, whatever wage he promised you, he'll halve it. But Josephus Prince," the slight flirt of a thumb chestward, indicated that the man with the resplendent name was personally speaking, "will double Wingate's offer and Josephus PRINCE will keep his word."

Heavy snorting and grunting behind Jennison warned him that his army was ready for battle now, not with the mythical Wingate indeed, but with the presumptuous Prince, who so assessed them as purchasable gunmen laid out on the bargain counter. Jennison shook his head at his eruptive comrades, then turned to the expectant Prince.

"We're prospectors," he emphasized meaningfully, "jest as I told you. Also and while I'm spadin', I'll shovel you out a chunk of advice. Don't mistake us fur gun-hirin' killers. As fur this Engate man you're tootlin' about, me and my pards here ain't never knowed him, nor heard of him before. And why did you drag in about Soames' Bar?"

"Because," Prince snapped back, "Wingate told me he was bringing in some fighting men from Soames' Bar and you six certainly fill the prescription."

"We set out minin' bent frum that said Soames' Bar," Jennison told him, "but so fur as Engate's concerned, I've already done related it. And is this here your dog I put outen his mad misery a few minutes back?"

The self-acknowledged Josephus Prince underwent a swift transformation at Jennison's innocently arrayed question. He snapped erect and his voice was harsh and uncompromising as he roared,

"That would not be my dog. It's another hell hound from Bacon Wingate's kennel. Well, I'm done. I'm going to clean him out. I'll go through his outfit like thin soup through a tin whistle."

JENNISON was about to ask Prince about the man to whose heel the dog's deadly jaw was still clamped, but he was forestalled by Doc Levitt, whose morning libations of four long pulls at a quart bottle of whiskey had filled him with a brisk, if misty professional interest. And his

interest was focussed on Prince's foreshortened upper lip. Not because of its absence, but rather because it represented to Levitt a surgical mishap, perhaps not yet beyond all mending. Having progressed to this hopeful opinion, he proceeded to voice it at the end of Prince's torrid oration anent Bacon Wingate, of the hounds of fate.

"Mr. Prince," he said without circumlocution, "had a competent surgeon been in attendance when your lip, alas, was riven away, he could have manufactured you another from your forearm. And even now I believe that there is a possibility, yes more than a possibility——"

But the well-meaning medico progressed no further in his prognosis. Not that Prince halted him with either eager acceptance or harsh refusal. Not that. Levitt's retreat into silence came though sheer amazement at the man's reaction to his simple suggestion. Prince grew white, a deadly pallor doubly emphasized by his raven hair and jet-black eyebrows. Then as swiftly as the blood had drained away, the red flood returned to suffuse his face and pound madly through his strutted veins. Yet not a word did he utter aloud, though his lower lip was moving spasmodically, mouthing sounds that never crossed the threshold of his writhing lip. Then he found mastery. His brow cleared, the blood retreated from his gorged veins, his eyes lost their maniacal glitter.

"Because you are a stranger," he stated coldly, "your reference to my infirmity will be overlooked. But," and he stressed it meaningfully, "a second reference will be at your peril." Without a further word he turned his horse about and rode away.

"Doc," Milt Scougal chuckled, "you came close to tipping over your applecart."

"Yep," Steve Donaldson declared, "that half-lip was in a killing mood."

"She all comes frum givin' unasked advice," Jennison analyzed. "Never have I seen it fail to raise hell when so done, and I've been on the givin' end a-plenty. And even when asked, results is like to be similar."

"And yet I could do him a great service," Levitt insisted.

"You could, Doc," Jennison agreed, "but you'll never have a chance with that pelican."

"Well, one thing's clear as daylight," Whispering Thompson remarked with his customary thunder. "That Prince man is crazy as a loon. I vote that nobody hereafter mentions the fact to him that he can't grow a mustache."

"True for yours," Jennison nodded, "fur the next time somebody's goin' to git slaughtered pronto, and it might be the loose-jawed talker. But how about this poor cuss at our feet, Doc?"

"We ought to take precautions against hydrophobia as speedily as possible."

"You've got to unclamp that said dog fust," Jennison stated the practical problem, "and I fur one ain't honin' fur the job. Some of them slobbers might git into a man's carcass and set him up same as the dog."

Old Bud Wiley proceeded to solve it. Lying a few yards away was the bleached and weather-washed skeleton of a longhorn and now with two ribs he pried away the grim-set jaws. Gaping open now, the lips snarling even in death, Jennison's exploring eye noted a thing that drew from him a startled expletive. The dog's tongue was amputated at the root. No recent excision this, so Levitt declared, but one certainly a month gone by. A strange chill seized the men, as they looked at each other pondering a question none could answer. What manner of valley was this where tongueless mad dogs ran amuck?

Levering the dog into a shallow dry wash, they were ready to tend to their patient. Steve Donaldson bowed his great shoulders to cradle the unconscious man as easily as if he were a sleeping child. Levitt motioned him over to the night's camp fire, stirred the dead ashes briskly until a bed of

red coals lay revealed, and then the contaminated boot heel was pushed down in the dull red mass. Almost instantly the air was redolent with the smell of scorched leather as Levitt applied his crude but efficient antisepsis. And he cauterized vigorously, without noting the hole in the boot above the instep. The man's return to consciousness was immediate and profound, though his vocal objections were feeble, if volume be the sole measure.

"What's the idee of burning me up?" the man snarled weakly.

"My ungrateful friend," Levitt explained, "there was no attempt to incinerate you as you seem to think. We were endeavoring, however, to cauterize the spot of possible infection wherein the mad dog had sunk his fangs."

It was a wilting word. The young man collapsed sidewise, rooting his face afresh in the dirt. Here he grovelled, whining like an animal until those kind-hearted men picked him up and laid him down gently on Scougal's blankets. Their restorative remedies took the route of a stiff dram of whiskey reinforced with brave words of assurance. The dog was dead and he had not even been scratched by those poison-laden fangs. So they labored him back to reasonableness and a measure of control over his jumpy nerves. And later they fed him, though his sullen refusal to wash his blood-mantled face gave rise to some interesting mental speculation, as did his story, given with more detail than plausibility.

He had, so he related, been mining back along this creek on which they were now camped. "Back" was indefinite enough, but the statement so stood. Indians had robbed him, he continued, and he had set out for this valley. Somewhere, he could identify it no more clearly than that, the mad dog had appeared. Without weapons, on a prairie destitute of trees, he did the only possible thing, flee. The crack of Jennison's rifle had ended the race, and things conscious for him. Almost as if by an after-thought, he informed them that he was Tad Stevens. It was a tale that possibly should have carried conviction, but to Jennison it seemed to limp in spots. So now when the narrator paused, he asked a half-question.

"That circle around your neck," he noted it almost casually, "sure looks like the trade mark of a rope."

"Oh that," Stevens replied. "Why I fell off a trail and caught my neck in a loop of smoking woodvine. Damned nigh strangled me."

"A thing I can believe easy," Jennison nodded dryly. "It sure resembles the trail of a lasso. Had your Adam's Apple been caressed by a noose she wouldn't look no different."

The glance that the stranger tossed Jennison's way was full of sullen defiance.

"What you're hinting ain't the facts anyway," he asserted. "This mark was come at the way I've told it."

Seeing that there was no further information to be readily come by from this source, the five companions turned their thoughts to plans for the immediate future.

JENNISON had told the exact truth when he had informed Prince that they were miners. For a month past they had followed that alluring will-o'-the-wisp in the mountains which ran their buttressed foothills down to the lip of this valley in which they had made their night's camp. Perdition Mountains they had been named spitefully by a group of trappers who had floundered long ago in their cross checking canyons and twisty ravines. Likewise the trappers had christened the creek Halleluiah, whose meanderings had finally extricated them from their perils. And on Halleluiah Creek Jennison and his comrades were now camped. Straight north before them, across the valley, the creek emerged through a V-shaped water gap to continue its wanderings on for a hundred miles to merge its frothing waters with the mighty Williamson.

There were Indians aplenty in these mountains, sullen and distrustful of all whites, vagrants, made so when this valley had been stolen from them by the rapacious cattle men. Yet they had shown little disposition to molest Jennison and his comrades and, by chance, Jennison had been able to render one of them a considerable service. Shortage of food had driven the six white men out and down Halleluiah Creek with a somewhat misty town, Dido, as their immediate objective.

The valley itself was worth more than a passing glance. Almost a perfect oval, it lay in a nest of tangled mountains, the two water gaps gouged out by the obstreperous creek, its only reasonable means of ingress and egress. Unmapped government land, it had been appropriated without leave by a few adventurous men who had found it a veritable paradise for stock. The creek running from south to north bisected the valley almost as perfectly as if done with a surveyor's transit. Jennison and his companions were to learn later that the valley contained approximately one hundred thousand acres.

ACCORDING to that Injin's WAWA," Steve Donaldson remarked apropos of their destination, "that town of Dido must be around fifty miles from here and us with only one more mess of flour for flapjacks. We'd better be moving is my TUM TUM."

"Dido," Doc Levitt mused, "was the queen of Carthage. Aeneas deserted her there, as the immortal Vigil relates."

"I've been thar," Bud Wiley pronounced boldly.

Levitt, somewhat surprised, voiced a mild query.

"Where, my misanthropic friend?"

"Carthage," Wiley reaffirmed with perfect assurance. "That town's in the state of Missoury and is where Joe Smith, the Mormon prophet, was killed for not wearing his bullet-proof shirt. Though," he hedged, "they wasn't talking of no queen at Carthage when I was thar."

"Bud," Levitt corrected the old man gently, "Dido was queen of the imperial city, Carthage, situated in Africa. And now tell me about that bullet-proof cuirass worn by the deceased Smith. It is a tale I fain would hear."

Jennison smiled understandingly at the kind-hearted medico, for Levitt knew the story of old as Jennison was well aware.

It was sunup when they broke camp and with their sullen patient mounted on a pack horse set their faces straight north for the water gap and the somewhat nebulous Dido. Middle of June though it was, in this secluded valley the luxuriant bunch grass was knee-high and green to its utmost tips. Cattle were spaced sparsely over this fabulous pasture, those within seeing distance on their left had branded J. P. on the right hip, dew-lapped and cropped eared. Plainly Josephus Prince left little opportunity for the talents of maverick-minded rustlers. At a casual guess the water gap was ten miles distant from their night's camp. It was probably still eight miles away when their peaceful trek was interrupted. The crack of three shots cut rough-shod across one of Levitt's elegant and well polished sentences.

"Listen!" Jennison called out sharply as he pulled his horse to a sudden stop. After all it was not the crash of pistol shots that riveted Jennison's attention. Not that. But following hard upon the shots had risen another sound that seemed to enfold and obliterate their triple roar. Milt Scougal shuddered at the sound.

"I once laid in a buffalo waller," he said in low, tense tones, "while a bunch of Siwashes put on a scalp dance not more than a dozen yards away. But THEIR yippings wasn't nothing to THAT!"

"Yep," Steve Donaldson chimed in, "and I once scrambled into a tree about

a foot ahead of a wounded grizzly, but what's eating on Bat?" he deflected his narrative suddenly, for Jennison was riding like mad, whipping in through the bushes that veiled the course of Halleluiah Creek. For to Jennison that melancholy chorus was coupled infallibly with the three shots, and there was imperative need, he reasoned, for great haste.

IN THE earth above or in the sea below there is no sound more terrifying than cattle mourning on a blood trail. No throat sound this, but deep, vibrant, throbbing, rolling its nerve-chilling dissonance up from chest and belly. A sound once heard, never to be forgotten, but warranted to furnish the fabric for many a disturbing dream. Under the lash of that racking crescendo, Jennison tore through the close-set brush, drove his pony through the shallow water, raced him up and over slight ridges a half dozen times the height of a man and had arrived at a point where he could see what was happening by the time his slower thinking comrades had milled down to the bank of the creek.

That one lightning glance comprehended and fixed every essential detail of a sinister cyclorama done in still life and heaving bodies not a dozen yards from where, for the space of ten heart beats, he halted atop the low ridge. A dead saddle pony pinning a boyish rider to the ground, a phalanx of milling cattle ringing a dead companion, their heads down, eyes blood shot, foam-flecked muzzles, madness incarnate, yet for the moment static, they mourned for their dead. And they were very near to the helpless rider. One wild, mad surge forward and his body would be mangled beyond all possible recognition.

Jennison whipped out a revolver and loosing a series of yells, charged straight for the swirling mass of cattle while he fired shots just over their straining backs. It was noise enough to distract their attention, but not enough to suggest retreat. Then sufficient impetus was added by the cyclonic arrival of Whispering Thompson. Pushing his saddle horse down toward Jennison he assaulted the astonished cattle with such a roaring tornado of threats and damnation that apparently concluding that their funeral rites had been duly finished they fled. Jennison looked at Thompson, to grin as he slid from his horse.

"Whisperin', whilst I misdoubt if they read your unfriendly words, they sure read the unfriendly sounds."

Still roaring, Thompson scrambled out of his saddle and straddling the white-faced cowboy, worked his mighty hands under the horse.

"When I heave up, Bat," he panted, "drag him out."

Tauting his giant muscles, he raised the tremendous weight some inches and held it long enough for Jennison to extricate the man.

Levitt, last to arrive, witnessed the near miracle and he crowned it with a classical allusion.

"Whispering, my mighty thewed friend," he opined, "you win over Archimedes. He required a fulcrum to move the earth. You would not need the fulcrum."

"Give Whispering a toe hold," Old Bud Wiley crackled, "and he could upend Mt. Hood."

III

ALREADY Jennison and Thompson were on their knees beside the youngster who, following a mumbled word of thanks, had sunk back with his head pillowed on Thompson's massive thigh. A tentative inspection revealed that the boot could never be drawn from the swollen foot and without hesitation Jennison drew his knife and split the boot leg from ear to instep.

"And the sock, Bat," Levitt counselled, as Jennison tugged at the ragged toe. "Or better still, give me the scalpel."

With hand steady as a rock, Levitt slit the unlaundered sock away and bending low looked keenly at the purplish swollen mass. Now with supple fingers, he diagnosed surely but swiftly. He turned about to look at the patient who had winced at Levitt's gentle probing.

"Sorry, my boy," he smiled apology, "but I must know whether it was a fracture or a sprain. Happily I find it is not broken. Cold compacts will reduce it within a few days."

The ankle was soon swathed in two ample bandanas, requisitioned from the brawny necks of Milt Scougal and Whispering Thompson, the gaudy compact duly soaked from Bud Wiley's canteen. Already Jennison's mackinaw had been folded under the youngster's head. Steve Donaldson, alone absent from the list of good Samaritans, fidgeted himself out a final service. Drawing out his flask and thumb nailing up the cork, he presented it with regal mien.

"Maybe," he suggested hopefully, "you ain't opposed to taking a drink."

Levitt gauged the slow inflow with professional eye.

"Enough," he stated presently, as with mechanical nonchalance he appropriated the flask and took more than a generous drink. Observing the notable depletion, Jennison grinned maliciously at Donaldson.

"She's plain writ, Steve," he chuckled, "that should the boy git a second drenchin' it's sure tricklin' forth from some other pelican's bottle."

"The laborer has always been esteemed to be worthy of his hire," Levitt smiled, "and I am a laborer." Now he turned to the young cowman.

"Lie back and rest for a few minutes, my boy. You've gone through a very trying experience."

"And maybe while you're resting," Whispering Thompson rumbled, "you can tell us how you got yourself in such a fix."

"I'm nearly ashamed to," the young man said a bit sheepishly, "because no real cowboy ought to get caught under his horse. First maybe I'd better introduce myself. I'm Jimmy Jones and I work for Sid Aidlaw. This is his range and the ranch house is a mile or so over there," and he wagged a drooping thumb feebly toward the east.

"Damned sight older men than you've got snubbed under a hoss," Jennison issued sententious comfort. "But go on with your snake killin'."

ALL right," Jimmy Jones nodded. "Well, the fact is that I've been kinda under the weather for a week past, so when the old man and the other boys piked away last evening to try and head off some trouble at the far end of the ranch, they left me home alone. I was lonesome and I've been homesick and being all alone made me worse and so instead of staying where I should, I saddled my pony and faded out on the range. Foolish, you're saying, but then there had never been any devilment over here. Just riding slow, and thinking and watching the hills in the moonlight and wishing I was back home in Ohio——"

"Ohio, did you say?" Whispering Thompson, emigrant from, and all time loyal son of the Buckeye state, thundered interruption. "It ain't likely that you come from Dayton, by any chance, and——"

"Wait, Whispering," Milt Scougal

counseled humorously, "so we can get the rest of the boy's story. Your no-good cousins back in Ohio are likely in jail, anyway."

"Which is more than probable," Whispering Thompson grinned appreciatively.

"Well, as I was telling you," young Jones took up the personal narrative, "I was moping along back here aways when somebody shot my horse and he bolted. About the next thing I can think of he was down on his side with my leg wedged under him. I figgered the old man and the boys would get back to the house about sunup and I knew they'd set out looking for me, so I just waited the best I could. Fact is, there ain't much to talk about till along about an hour ago. My leg had got numb by that time, so I wasn't suffering as much as at first, but I was pretty cold, you bet, anyway till the cows put in an appearance. You men know range cattle."

"Yep," Jennison said with plenty of emphasis. "Damned hoofers are curious as a old maid. They cat-footed it up to you, tails stickin' up straight as ramrods, heads up, and so forth."

"Just exactly," the young fellow agreed with a shudder, "and then I remembered I'd come off with just the cartridges in my pistol. Still I kept looking for the boys and I kept hoping maybe the cattle would get interested in something else——"

"Till you couldn't stand it no longer, but whanged away," Bud Wiley contributed the finale. "Which was all you coulda done. They'd have tramped you flatter than a flapjack anyway."

"Well," Jennison remarked cheerfully, "she's almighty lucky you so did. We heard them shots, also the cattle. Had we heard the latterly solely, she's like we'd a voted it nothin' but a cow's notion of how to put on a funeral and passed you up. And now you said somebody shot your hoss. I don't see no blood signs."

"Because," the boy amazed them by saying, "he was shot with an arrow."

"AN INJUN trick," Steve Donaldson growled as they turned with one accord to investigate. And found it instantly, a six-inch stem of wood projecting from an almost bloodless puncture half way between the heel and hip of the horse's left hind leg. Lying as he was on his left side, the arrow had very naturally escaped their attention. With a grunt, Whispering Thompson seized the shaft and jerked it forth to double its length. But headless it emerged from the wound, and that head Jennison was very eager to see. He glanced at young Jones.

"Jimmy," he explained tactfully, "I'd like to see that arrowhead, but we'd hafta carve into your hoss a mite. If you've gotta feelin' ag'in it, we'll leave it be."

"It's all right," the boy conceded wretchedly, "Maje won't feel it, and anyway it might lead to something. But be careful. It's poisoned. They all are."

So warned, the autopsy was conducted with due circumspection. But in time they worried the arrowhead forth. They found the base fashioned so that the shaft was easily detached, leaving the head embedded deeply within the wound. With his toe, Jennison scraped the arrow head onto a flake of rock where they could study it at a respectful distance.

"She's hand hammered," Jennison announced positively, "outen a horse shoe nail. Not many Injuns is that work brittle. And Jimmy, why are the Siwashes on the warpath ag'in your boss?"

"They don't like anybody in this valley," Jimmy explained, "but especially they don't like Sid. He's been rougher on them than any of the other cattlemen. Hanged three of them he nabbed with a yearling steer they'd killed. That was about two months ago and since then we've caught hell."

Doc Levitt had picked up the twelve-inch arrow shaft and contemplated it long and thoughtfully. Springs of memory were stirring, till to the sur-

face popped a sudden inspiration. He turned to the wondering group to add mystery to mystery.

"Boys," he gave it as his conclusion, "this is not an arrow but rather a quarrel. Its brevity proves it."

The men gaped foolishly for a moment, then Bat Jennison, already chin deep in ignorance, proceeded to submerge to his ears.

"She ain't a quarrel, Doc," he distinguished in lordly fashion, "havin' traveled on into a war. But she's a arrow, notwithstandin' that soundy name you tacked onto it."

"'Brevity' perhaps?" Levitt questioned indulgently. "That means in common parlance, shortness. My real point is that no bow is constructed that with it so short an arrow could be driven six inches into solid muscle."

THE men, well aware that explanation peered at them from just around the corner, gave the tiny shaft renewed attention. Notched but not feathered, it was indeed an anomaly in bow projectiles, to forget even its short length.

"Injuns generally use arrows nearer three feet long than a foot," Steve Donaldson puzzled.

"Yep, and longer," Old Bud Wiley remarked out of a wide and uncomfortable knowledge. "Take them bows they set down to shoot, bracing them on their feet and pulling the string with both hands. Them arrows would plow through both sides of a wagon bed."

"You betcha," Milt Scougal chuckled, "and through a man also if he happened to be squatted down inside that said wagon bed."

Jennison had listened indifferently to the digressions of his comrades, while his mind was occupied with Levitt's first remark. So now he turned to the learned doctor and asked the direct question.

"Doc," he queried, "what's your answer to the puzzle you've set up?"

"That this arrow was fired from a cross bow," Levitt asserted. "In the days of chivalry they were called bolts or quarrels. Hence my statement."

"In which case, Doc," Jennison rendered critical judgment, "and because I ain't doubtin' you've tagged the missile proper, some highly muddy water is showin' up in the clear spring of knowledge."

With this cryptic judgment duly delivered, he got up briskly.

"Since Jimmy's some rested," he said sunnily, "I figger we'd best be gittin' him home. Sunflower'll ride double, so if you'll set him crosswise in the saddle, I'll fork my pony behind. That way he won't git his hurt foot joggled unduly."

The sensible suggestion was put quickly into effect and within five minutes they had turned aside from their quest for Dido and were pointed toward the ranch-house of Sid Aidlow. Without their knowing it, The Valley of Silent Death had claimed them as part and parcel of its tragic mystery.

THEY had left the man slumped forlornly on his horse when they had rushed to rescue Joe and not one of them had given him a thought since. But now as they returned to the spot they found the bird had flown. The six exchanged dumbfounded glances.

"Sure beats hens-a-wrastling," Old Bud Wiley ejaculated.

"She's plain writ," Jennison asserted, "that fur reasons ample to him and likewise hid frum yours truly he didn't hanker to stick around. And what's more, could any of you boys talk a picture of him that'd tag him to anybody who'd not viewed him personal? If so speak out."

Admitted bankruptcy greeted his invitation, though Levitt made a shrewd suggestion.

"You're thinking Bat that there is significance in the fact that he would not even wash for breakfast?"

"You betcha," Jennison nodded. "He was togged out in a nachrul mask, and had reasons fur not removin' the same.

Accordin' to my figurin', thar's jest one thing by which he could be knowed ag'in."

"You mean that mark around his neck?" Scougal queried.

"Nope," Jennison disagreed. "That's come at either like he tells it, or from a rope mebby, but anyway it'll be gone in a few days. But he's gotta limp in his left hoof. Of course it's mebby jest a sprain, but it's mebby permanent. Thar's one idee though that did come to me. If you noticed he was dressed out from head to toe in black. Well, if you straddled that black bird across a black hoss, he'd sure be hard to see of nights."

A MILE or so of slow traveling brought them in sight of their destination. A flat, wide-spraddled cabin built of logs and roofed with brush and dirt, Aidlow's house would have won the lowliest medal in an architect's contest. A squat, stick-and-mud chimney perked up rakishly at the west end, its sooty mouth clearing the roof by a matter of two scant feet. Of corrals there was one, also a brush-covered, rambling, pole shed, open at both ends. Feeding racks were absent, for in this sheltered valley, cattle foraged the year round. For their horses in the dead of winter, they harvested a limited amount of blue-joint hay, cut with a scythe in a nearby meadow. But they had a spring house, its two foot thick walls of adobe built to enclose a bubbling spring, the constant temperature not many degrees removed from freezing.

As they halted before the house, four men appeared from around the shed and, seeing Jennison's party, rode on.

"Some of our boys," young Jones told Jennison, "but the old man is not with them."

Most noticeable of the four was a big swarthy man, and now he caught sight of the youngster held crosswise in the saddle by Jennison's gripping his belt. To his hard and unsympathetic mind it suggested nurse and child and a well known pacifier of those unenlightened days. To think it was to say it.

"Nussin' baby!" he guffawed. "Where's your sugar tit?"

Quick-tempered as Jennison was, he was cold and slow and dallying when compared with Steve Donaldson. To hear a comrade talk to an injured comrade in such an unfeeling way was like pushing a lighted match jauntily into a cannister of loose powder.

"What kind of a damned Piute are you?" Donaldson said harshly, "to say a thing like that to your pardner and him hurt?"

The man assailed in this rough fashion made instant retort in kind.

"Who asked you to stick your horse face into something that's none of your business?" he slashed back.

Donaldson's answer to this searching query was the acme of simplicity.

"Climb down," he invited, "and I'll make it some of my business."

The man so personally addressed glanced at his three companions and a contemptuous sneer slid across his harsh face. They feared him and hated him. Had he been set upon they would have gone to his assistance. Loyalty to the Aidlow outfit would have demanded that. But not now.

Then he looked at the strangers. No guileless pilgrims these, but self-sufficient, courageous and able. Yet he was a brave, hard man, brutal and opinionated to whom taking a dare was next to unthinkable. And he wanted mightily to come to grips with Donaldson who had dared to call his remarks in question. Therefore he parleyed.

I'D CRAWL down in a minute, Horseface," he told Donaldson insolently, "but how do I know that some of your crew won't pot me in the back while we battle?"

Bat Jennison had slid from his horse and it was Jennison who answered. And not quite as his comrades might have expected.

"Me and my pards," he said with quiet dignity, "are honest, square men

which you'd know frum their looks if you'd always traveled with their kind. Should you and Mr. Donaldson, thar, git tangled, said rumpus will go the limit outen no interference from ANYBODY, till one of you yells. But as I look at it, you're in the wrong, a thing mebby you don't see. You emitted frum your organs of speech, words which you probly figgered was bubblin' with jokes. Well, we don't figger it so. That pore boy's hurt and he's one of your Aidlow boys. My judgment is you oughta say you're sorry, and wipe what Mr. Donaldson said offen your memory slate."

"That's Ples Cantrell," Jimmy Jones had whispered as Jennison slid from behind the saddle, "and he's dangerous."

And now this same Ples Cantrell thrust Jennison's olive branch rudely aside.

"What I say to toddlers like Jimmy Jones," he said uncompromisingly, "is my business. Also what I say to jackasses who kick into messes that's none of their affairs. So if you're sure you can keep your gang from shooting me in the back, I'll learn Horseface a lesson."

"Guns, fists or knives?" was Donaldson's sole comment.

"I could best you with anything," Cantrell said confidently, "but I figure I can have more fun with you using my fists."

Jennison, grim-lipped and cold-eyed, addressed an inexorable command to the recalcitrant rider, coupled with a crisp addendum.

"Hand your gun to one of your men, you Siwash, before you even take your foot outen your stirrup. And if you make one spurious move, she'll be your last and final. She'd be a plum pleasure fur me to nail you to your saddle with a lead spike." He reached up and took Donaldson's proffered gun with the sage advice,

"Knock him hell west and crooked, Steve."

Steve Donaldson climbed down, removed his mackinaw, hung it on the saddle horn and straddled it with his Stetson. Now he shook the roach of roan hair back from his eyes, unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them above his elbows. Two hundred twenty pounds of bone and muscle built into a six-foot-two body and you have a sketchy view of Donaldson. Cantrell, as tall and certainly giving away no more than five pounds, had an age advantage of probably ten years. His preparedness had duplicated Donaldson's, though done with more speed and less calculated deliberation. Milt Scougal, a shade heavier than Donaldson and a tremendous battler, now issued a bit of counsel, bedded on observation.

"From the looks of his long black finger nails, Steve, he's likely a gouger. Watch out that he don't git his claws in your eyes."

"If he tries to gouge you, Steve," the giant Thompson rumbled, "you know where to plant your knee."

"This fight goes to a finish," Jennison issued a flat ultimatum, "outen interference frum anybody till one of 'em yelps."

Cantrell looked in turn at Donaldson's earnest advisors and his blubber like lips curled scornfully,

"If your cotton bellied pard can't take punishment," he jeered, "he'd better hoist the white flag right now for he's sure due."

Donaldson's answer was a crisp invitation shunted between clenched teeth,

"Sail in!"

III

THE maneuver with which Cantrell inaugurated the fight was as swift as it was dastardly. Pivoting on his left foot, he drove with his right boot for Donaldson's lower belly. Had his number eleven cowhide fulfilled its planned function, Donaldson would have been out, maimed for life, if not killed. But Donaldson was a seasoned battler and he

had encountered men who fought with their feet before this day. So it was that the flailing boot merely tapped at the muscle barricaded door, was clipped instantly in Donaldson's corded hand and elevated shoulder high with a mighty heave.

Cantrell followed the foot to land on his shoulders, completed the back flip with incredible agility and was back with a speed that was amazing. And disconcerting to Donaldson's friends. Here was a fighter who combined everything, savage courage, great strength and the muscular balance of a circus acrobat, all motivated by a brutal, implacable will. If Donaldson won this battle without the intervention of chance, he must climax any past performance.

Cantrell bounded back as if his body were set on springs, came toe to toe with Donaldson, who stood with his guards well up, then with a sudden jerk of his head, Cantrell had drilled the air with a thin jet of tobacco juice with his opponent's eyes as the immediate objective.

But Donaldson had noted the pursing of those tobacco stained lips and read the act to the end even before its swift initiation. To counter, he lunged with his left, met the amber stream midair with his freckled fist, dammed its flow and drove it back upon its source. The thwack of his iron knuckles crushed Cantrell's bulbous lips and snapped two teeth short at the gums. Cantrell, spitting the fragments out between his lacerated lips with a grimace that was not pretty to see, bored in, both fists working like steam-driven riveters.

And he could hit. Donaldson's high-arched Roman nose was all but dismantled by his first blow, a second ripped his ear loose for half its length. Then he lunged under Donaldson's guard, his right hand flashing forward, fingers sprawled wide like the talons of a bird of prey, rigid thumb seeking Donaldson's left eye.

Donaldson caught the flash of those steel-like fingers, sensed the intention and extricated himself by a near-miracle. Jerking his head back sharply, he clamped his teeth at a hazard at the thumb sweeping by, caught it fairly and bore down.

Cantrell, game to the core, yanked back savagely to break that deadly grip and for a fleeting second exposed his neck to Donaldson's powerful right fist. Had the blow landed fairly, Cantrell that night would have slumbered with his fathers. But the burr of the ear and the angle of the jaw absorbed a part of the pile-driver force, though enough remained to rock him into oblivion.

STEPHEN, my trip-hammer friend," Levitt observed magisterially, "unless your antagonist has the neck muscles of a buffalo bull, his atlas is even now refted from its axis."

"Says what, Doc?" Jennison puzzled. "Or what do you mean by such gibberish?"

"Not gibberish, Bat," Levitt remonstrated, "but a physiological fact. I mean simply that the man's neck may be dislocated."

Now, with hands on knees, Levitt leaned down and studied the unlovely picture presented by the beaten man. Then his educated fingers were exploring the puffed and fast discoloring neck. Next his hand pressed for a long moment above the heart. He straightened up.

"The vertebrae are IN SITU," he announced. "In other words, he is uninjured save for a few notable contusions. In a few minutes he will regain consciousness. Let him lie."

"I'd let him lay till he rotted," one of Aidlow's men declared bitterly. "He's the meanest whelp I ever knowed."

"But able," Jennison added. "Any man who can stand up ag'in Steve here is sure a he-man."

"He didn't stand up long," Old Bud Wiley distinguished. "And if he'd fight fair he'd 'a lasted quicker."

Doc Levitt approached Donaldson and regarded attentively that swollen, puffy mass that had once been an authentic Roman nose.

"Steve," he opined, "your olfactory apparatus is in a sad state of disrepair. Let me see what I can do toward restoring its former symmetry. Then I'll return your ear to its rightful neighborhood."

Now he kneaded the formless mass as a potter might a lump of clay until some semblance of a nose reappeared. He stood back and studied his work with a critic's eye.

"Not so bad," he nodded, "but it will probably serve you ill when odors are concerned. And now the ear."

"Doc, thar's some luck mebby tied up in that minus sayin' about his smeller," Jennison chuckled. "Steve can now go about a Siwash camp outen gaggin' as formerly. Also sheep won't be no more bother. And as to——"

A sound behind them cut off Jennison's peroration. Unnoticed by the group absorbed in Donaldson's face-lifting operation, his antagonist had recovered consciousness, crawled a couple of steps to the pole corral and by its rungs had swayed erect. Now he stood here unsteadily, back braced against the corral as he issued his challenge.

"This ain't only the first round," he croaked. "Come on and let's finish."

JENNISON admired courage, and here it was stark and dauntless. Yet if appearances were worth the recording, it was a courage as futile as indomitable.

"You ain't fit," Jennison said bluntly. "You're game all right, but you cain't function."

"Come on and fight, you—" Cantrell mouthed, "I'll set your beak round under your ear again."

His defiant words caught the ears of a newcomer, a short, heavy-set man with flaming hair and redder beard. Aidlow, owner of the ranch, had arrived.

Followed one sweeping glance, then he pulled up his horse while one of his riders in clipped sentences made clear the strange tableau. With a growl Aidlow turned about and fixing Cantrell with his compelling eyes, delivered an uncomplimentary opinion.

"From what Chic tells me," he said sternly, "you got just what was coming to you, though probably not enough to drill any sense into your damned noggin. BUT," and he stressed it, "there's not going to be any more scrapping. And if you want to stay here on my ranch, step up like a man and shake hands with this stranger. Be moving."

Cantrell stared hard at his uncompromising boss, scowled at the ground as if in the grip of indecision, then looked at Donaldson and his coterie of friends. Now his battered features seemed in the throes of some unguessed emotion. That warping convulsion might be a grin of friendliness, a leer of cunning, or a sneer of reckless daring. Straightening up as if by a great effort of will, he staggered forward, right hand outstretched.

Donaldson, as generous a man as ever lived, accepted this badge of reconciliation without hesitation. But as their palms struck, Cantrell did a dastardly thing. Gripping Donaldson's right hand, he dragged back with all his power, while his left fist crashed like a piston rod against Donaldson's unprotected chin. Donaldson dropped like a beef under a sledge hammer.

"Wanted you to know how it feels to be knocked out!" Cantrell grunted triumphantly.

It was a triumph smothered in the moment of its birth. Whispering Thompson seized the boaster as the treacherous blow swung him sideways, a giant hand to his collar and another to the slack of his trousers and with a bellow of fury swept him skyward, belly up. With a mighty heave he hurled him outward. Spread-eagled, Cantrell struck the corral. That the hurtling body smashed the

top cottonwood poles, that the sprawling body struck the ground rolling and came to a jerky rest a dozen feet from the fence was proof a plenty of Thompson's titanic strength.

Aidlow slid lithely from his saddle, while Jennison watched him closely for signs of war. Rebuke to Cantrell might be well enough when issuing from the boss himself, but would he tolerate it when coming from a stranger? This pertinent question remained unanswered for a moment only. Aidlow pushed up to Thompson and thrust out a thick freckled hand.

"YOU done correct," he declared without ire. "And I'm damned if I ever saw a thing done completer. Your name ain't Samson by any chance? I mean the man in The Scriptures who carried off the gates of Babylon."

"My name's Thompson," the giant informed him. "And as for them said gates, they came from Jerico, if I remember right."

"Which you don't," Steve Donaldson, reclining in groggy fashion against Doc Levitt's knee disputed in mumbling fashion. "They come from Ninevah."

"Wait, Bat," Doc Levitt interrupted with a threatened eruption. "Your words would only add confusion. The gates came from the city of Gaza."

"Jest what I was goin' to remark," Jennison asserted brazenly. "Scripture names hole up in my mind nachral."

Now he introduced his comrades to Aidlow and his men while Jimmy Jones added a thankful word about his rescue.

"Judas H. Priest," Jimmy shuddered, "if they hadn't happened along!"

"Fact is," Jennison contributed, "this whole thing jest happened. We'd been back in these Perdition Mountains minin' and gittin' tired of grubbin' our faces on scenery and bear meat, we leaked out for Dido. We were movin' in that general direction this mornin' when we run into Jimmy."

"Gentlemen," Aidlow said heartily, "you're as near to Dido as you need to go. I laid in a half year's provisions not a month ago and I've got two quarters of prime beef chilling right now in the spring house yonder. Strip the dunnage off your horses and turn them out with my cavvy. There's room for your stuff in the cabin. Unpack your cooking artillery and we'll turn to and get breakfast. Me and my boys ain't eat yet and you likely could take on a flapjack or two."

There was a certain strained eagerness threaded through his genial tones that did not escape Jennison. Genuine hospitality there was indeed, and something else. Levitt, pondering the invitation, now injected a planned remark.

"That spring," he said tactfully, "furnishes you with nature's supreme beverage! Doubtless you require no other."

Aidlow grinned understandingly.

"That spring water ain't to be sneezed at," he conceded, but it's too thin for all-round purposes, especially in a country overrun with rattlers. I've got besides that water, two five gallon kegs of good whiskey and I don't know how many quarts of assorted liquors. Does that whisper anything to you?"

"My friend," Levitt responded, "the sound of that whisper is magnified into a hurricane of delight. What, forsooth, is Dido to me? Echo answers."

"Then it's settled," Aidlow said happily. "I'm some histed to have you men as my guests. Wait a minute till I speak a word to Ples, then we'll move on the grub pile."

TOUGH as a hickory nut, Ples Cantrell had in a measure recovered from the effects of Thompson's terrific heave. Groggy, but game, he had limped up to the fence through which he had so recently hurdled and cradling his arms on the top pole, watched the greetings between Aidlow and Jennison's crowd. And he grinned in broken toothed fashion out through

a mask of blood and grime. Aidlow stepped over to the corral.

"Ples," he said in tones too low for the others to hear, "if you start any more rows with these men, I'll end it with a six shooter."

"I don't see it, boss," Cantrell puzzled. "Me and them three big boys could have a whale of a time skylarking with each other. First time I've had a chance at any real fun in a year and you trip it up."

Aidlow looked at the battered man queerly.

"When the devil spawned you," he stated at length, "he over done himself. Now hear me. NO MORE RUCKUSES! If you start another, I'll mow you down without another warning. You know me well enough to know that I don't chew my tobacco twice."

"I can't see it," Cantrell answered, "but you bet I'll do as you say. Still," he contended, "you're putting the Injun sign on a lot of good clean fun."

Aidlow turned away to lead the procession toward the house, while Cantrell clambered through the fence and hobbled over to his horse. Jennison lingered a moment, for as Cantrell had crawled through the fence, something slithered from a gaping pocket and plumped into the grass. Unobtrusively, Jennison retrieved the shining object and without haste slid it into his pocket. Not very big and common enough in all conscience, yet it was to furnish Jennison a take-off for intriguing speculation in hours to come.

To a pampered epicure, that meal would have carried no appeal. Those rakish ricks of flapjacks, those monumental heaps of fried beefsteak, the huge cups of black coffee poured prodigally from blacker pots, the half dozen cans of peaches and green gage plums opened rudely with a hatchet and set out so upon the coverless table, all these things would have given rise to repugnance and disdain. Unless that same epicure had possessed an appetite whetted and sharpened by fasting. But to these hardy men, perennially hungry, it was a feast worthy of gods, to say nothing of mere men. Bat Jennison, a mighty trencherman, despite his slight form, sighed blissfully as he loosened his tauted belt.

"Doc," he asserted heavily, "them gods who you relate as kennelin' onto Mount Lilanus and who et ambergrease and drunk naphtha, didn't fare no better than us. On the contrary."

Levitt nodded indulgently, for the dots and dashes sprinkled through the conversation of his unhistorical friend mattered not at all to him.

"You are right, thrice right, my pugnacious friend," Levitt smiled. "For the thin beverages and shadowy foods that sustained their filmy bodies had neither taste, odor nor substance. Though I have always fancied," he hedged tactfully, "that the nectar they consumed as a beverage was doubtless whiskey, an ancient edition of our modern Old Crow."

Aidlow grinned as he passed the bottle.

IV

FOR a moment he sat there while his eye wandered in amused way over the littered table and grease-splattered stove. Then his glance traveled on to linger on his men. Five they were, with Jimmy Jones and the battered Cantrell. None had slept the whole night through. He got up.

"You boys hit the hay," he said briskly. "Later we'll turn in and swab up this wreck. I'm going to drag these strangers out under the trees for a talk before I try for sleep. And Jimmy, we'll stretch you out on my bunk there."

Levitt arose leisurely and captured another drink.

"Send one of your boys down to the spring, Mr. Aidlow, for a fresh bucket of water," said he. "I want to change the packs on Jimmy's ankle. Cold water is the best medicine for his type of injury."

"Walt," Aidlow said to one of his

men, "go get the water for the doctor."

As the man picked up the bucket, Cantrell spoke up.

"I've got a bottle of Roak's Liniment in the bunkhouse," he told Levitt. "Mighty good truck for sprains, I'm telling you."

"Quite right," Levitt nodded. "Get it, if you please."

Very gently Levitt applied the famous liniment, swathed Jimmy's ankle anew in packs wrung from water little above the temperature of ice and adjusted a folded coat under the injured limb.

Now he laid his hand for a second on the boy's shoulder.

"Be as still as a proverbial mouse, my boy," he smiled. "You're on the highway to recovery, right now."

With Jimmy cared for, Aidlow led the way outside. Here a half dozen silver maples were irregularly grouped about a flat of virgin grass, with bench for those who sat and a pair of saddle blankets for those who preferred to sprawl. Old Bud Wiley, an inveterate whittler, secured a bit of soft pine to minister to his pet vice. Doc Levitt marched serenely, a fresh bottle clasped in intimate fashion by the neck.

The spot enclosed by the trees was a bit of a knoll, with the enclosing valley wall in full, if circular, view. Looking south toward the source of Halleluiah Creek, the Perdition Mountains were brought into jagged sight. West, north, east, their foreshortened offspring were to be seen less jagged, lowly, more like rolled-up foothills than self-respecting mountains. The knoll was near the center of the valley, a flattened ellipse in shape, its longer diameter running east to west. The valley floor was almost as level as a table, grass covered, across which a few small water courses crawled to merge their mites with Halleluiah Creek. For a long moment Aidlow looked out over this stockman's heaven, then he sighed.

"The Injuns," he said slowly, "called this country the valley where The Manitou smiles."

"The Valley Where God Smiles," Jennison translated thoughtfully.

IT WAS all the Injuns called it," Aidlow nodded retrospectively, "till white men came in and drove them out. Four of us hold the whole valley by squatting. Josephus Prince claims everything west of Halleluiah Creek, say about fifty thousand acres. Bacon Wingate, joining me on the north, holds thirty thousand acres more or less. My claim is about half of Wingate's. Cris Franklin's satisfied with about five thousand acres and him here ten years before Prince thumbed in. But then Franklin don't depend on cattle. I doubt if he's got over two hundred head all told."

Levitt, mellowed and historically minded due to continued intimacies with the bottle, stirred at Aidlow's cataloguing of acres, held or claimed or squatted.

"Measured in holdings," he observed oracularly, "and such holdings transmuted in terms of heraldry, you men would rank diminuendo as a prince, a baron, a knight, a country squire or franklin. Strange coincidence it is indeed to find Josephus Prince cast in the role of Prince and Christopher Franklin as franklin. Prophetic, if I may use that sacred word without offense, foreshadowing great and notable events."

Aidlow looked at Levitt curiously.

"I don't catch the full drift of all your lingo," he admitted frankly, "but anyway that's the set up. I never liked any of them but Franklin, but we got along tolerable till lately. And now," he added as if relating the most casual of things, "there ain't a one of us who wouldn't be tickled to stick a knife into the other feller and twist it. Maybe I ought to leave old Chris Franklin out of the hate herd, and him with the best reasons of all. Yes sir, gentlemen. This valley is eat up with hate and suspicion and fear. 'Valley Where The Manitou Smiles.' She sure ought to be called now 'Valley Where The Devil Laughs Out Loud!'"

"That's strong talk, Mr. Aidlow,"

Whispering Thompson remarked, "and there's likely strong reasons to back it."

Aidlow all but leaped from his bench, his poise swept away like an autumn leaf in a sudden gust of wind. His face working, his clenched fists raised, if not acting, he was in the clutch of tremendous emotions. Vehement, shouting words tumbled from his lips now as he indicted the fair valley.

"It's the Devil's Playground," he declared, "where mad dogs gallop and bloated cattle rot by the hundreds. And how'd you fancy riding out of nights," he demanded in frenzied tones, "and know every minute you might get rammed in the back with a poisoned arrow? My God!" he gasped. "I've lost two men that way inside a month and I don't know how many cows and horses. I tell you it's driving me crazy and I ain't any different from the rest of the men, except maybe Chris Franklin."

He shuddered down upon the bench, exhausted, trembling, unnerved, while his guests looked at him in astonishment. It would be a tonic to unbosom himself of the story, Jennison reasoned.

"It'd mebby do you good," he suggested, "should you unspool your whole bobbin. It ain't unlike that we can wind it up ag'in outen snarls or knots. S'pose you take up these men, one by one."

YOU'RE maybe right," Aidlow conceded, "and I'll start with Josephus Prince, who I never liked and who I figger has gone crazy since his mishap two years back. I mean him getting his lip bit off. And I never liked Bacon Wingate much better. Well, Wingate and Prince fell out a while back over a woman in Dido. She lit out with a gambler leaving them both in the soup, but even that didn't sweeten them up none to each other. That was maybe six weeks ago. We'd all been over to Dido stocking up on grub, and so forth. Now to get the point to what follered. Wolves along the timbered edge of this valley have always been more than troublesome. Picking up yearlings and calves, you understand. Well, while the rest of us depended on traps and guns, Wingate brought in some hunting dogs, a dozen or so to take care of the wolves on his range. Right after the row at Dido over a no-good woman, a something happened and I mean something."

"Mad dog turn up?" Bud Wiley hazarded.

"Good guess," Aidlow nodded. "One night a dog drifted up to a campfire where some of Prince's boys were larking. It happened so sudden and not expected that he bit three of them before they knowed what was going on. But when somebody shot him and they saw the foam on his muzzle, maybe you can imagine what follered. Already one of the three was dying. He'd slipped and shot himself in the thigh. Another of the bit men took a look at the dog kicking there in the ashes, then he done a brave thing. He shot himself. He'd seen a man once who'd went mad. The other man later died. And," he added slowly, "they say it's a death you don't want to see. And strange as it may sound, that mad dog did not howl. How do you figure that, Doctor?"

"Because," Jennison answered for Levitt, "his tongue was cut out. We noticed it this morning. Guess I'll tell you about it."

With no reference to the man they had rescued, and giving Prince and his men little space, Jennison told his tale.

"So that's it," Aidlow puzzled.

"That's it," Jennison nodded. "No wonder they don't howl. But go on."

"Well," Aidlow continued, "that mad dog threw the camp into an uproar and kept it that way all night. Next morning early, they started a man hot-foot for Wingate's to just about accuse them of everything. But lo and look you, Wingate swore that his whole pack of hounds were gone, and had been for a month. He showed the Prince rider the empty kennels and it was a fact that there wasn't a visible sign of a dog anywhere."

"Did Wingate say his dogs had been stole or what?" Steve Donaldson queried with absorbed interest.

"Wingate didn't say that exactly," Aidlow answered, "nor has he yet when he talks about it. All he says is that one night they just vanished, him and all his men being away so he tells it."

"She's a damned funny project," Jennison observed thoughtfully "'specially snubbed in with that mad dog happenin' in onto Prince who Wingate didn't like. Probable that Prince kited to the same idea?"

"He did so," Aidlow assured him, "but couldn't prove nothing. But," and he stressed the corollary, "here was one of Wingate's dogs slobbering mad and there were about a DOZEN MORE, SOME PLACE unless they'd been already killed. If one was mad, likely the dozen would be. I tell you, men, it sure sent plenty of shivers chasing up and down the spines of every man in this valley."

Old Bud Wiley, who had never liked dogs anyway, cast a swift glance about him. Aidlow noted it, but without a smile.

"The plot sure thicks up, as the feller says," Jennison remarked suggestively. Aidlow took the cue to continue.

WELL, Prince's man rode back to report, and Wingate's went about their regular business. But next morning THEY had something to think about. Around and in the neighborhood of ONE single salt trough were stretched close to fifty dead cows, poisoned without the shadow of a doubt."

Jennison and his friends hunched forward on their benches. There was tragedy in the air, war in the making. And mystery. Who could resist it? Encouraged by their increasing, if unspoken interest, Aidlow proceeded to gratify it.

"In their minds," he reported the obvious, "there was no doubt as to who had sifted the arsenic into the salt troughs that night. They knew that Prince fought the wolves that way. He had arsenic. And they had more solid evidence than that in the shape of a spur found close by."

"A spur's a spur," Donaldson remarked dogmatically. "That proved nothing."

"I know," Aidlow conceded. "As a usual thing that's so, but then there're SPURS. This one was so different that every Wingate man knowed the owner the minute he got his eyes on it. "For Prince had a Mexican VAQUERO, a man named Manuel something or other who wore spurs as different from the ordinary make as his beaded vest was different from a seersucker coat. You bet, they weren't long in gathering up their artillery and streaking for the Prince range."

"And gotta set-back," Jennison hazarded shrewdly. "Manuel didn't leave that tell-tale spur to jingle thar, I'm guessin'."

Aidlow looked at Jennison in some surprise.

"Who told you?" he asked.

"Common sense," Jennison replied. "The plantin's too plain. A blind man'd smell it."

"Maybe," Aidlow agreed grudgingly. "Anyway when Wingate's men run onto this Manuel, he swore that his precious spurs had both been stole, or at any rate had disappeared three days or so before."

"And told the truth likely," Jennison nodded with satisfaction. "The highly intrustin' question'd be, stole by who, also why? Yet and but between the Wingate mad dog loose out onto Prince's range and Wingate's dead cows roweled, so to speak with Manuel's spur, she's a hedged bet that mutual suppicions sprouted wings right then."

"They did," Aidlow confirmed his thesis in serious tones. "Not only for them, but for us. The notion of mad dogs running loose and cattle being poisoned in bunches didn't add to our peace of mind. I mean mine and Chris

Franklin's. Who could expect that only Prince and Wingate'd be involved? But the fact is that so far we've both practically escaped. I've lost some cattle from poison, and we've killed one mad dog and two mad coyotes. Franklin's had about the same run of luck. But then he ain't got over a couple of hundred cows at the outside."

"What's his living then?" Scougal broached the natural question.

"A placer mine," Aidlow informed him, "and a well-hid out one at that." He grew animated. "Rich, don't mention it! Why, I saw him once at Dido flash two nuggets of water-washed gold, pure, weighing four pounds!"

"A thousand dollars," Whispering Thompson whistled his respect. "I never saw anything that rich. Where'd you say his mine is?"

WISH I knew," Aidlow sighed. "Well, that shows you why a few cows more or less don't worry him. Franklin's the best man of us all and hates the least, with the biggest reasons for hate. Listen, I'll tell you why." He ended his recital by saying, "And I hung his brother-in-law six weeks ago. Yep. Franklin's got the right to hate."

"How come," Steve Donaldson cut in, "you strung up that said brother-in-law?"

"For stealing," Aidlow answered flatly. "I forgot to say that he was an Injun. You see Franklin's a squaw man."

"You hung three Injuns," Jennings said accusingly, "accordin' to Jimmy, and jest on account of them rustlin' one damned yearlin' calf."

"Didn't you ever help hang a horse thief?" Aidlow countered.

"Nope and never will," Jennison denied crisply. "We've help braid some and several fancy rope neckties, but not fur that. Still," he added generously, "mebby we'd a done diffrunt if we'd had Siwashes to mingle against 'stead of white men."

"So you see," Aidlow returned to his main argument. "Franklin's got a hard thing against every one of us other three cattle men and still his hate ain't got the bitter gall in it we've got for each other."

"He must be a gentleman," Levitt meditated.

"He is," Aidlow said emphatically, "and by long odds the smartest man in the valley. He's got a yard long telescope mounted in a tree house. Studies the stars; what for I don't know. And books. Lent me one once, Ivoryhole, seems to me."

"Ivanhoe, possibly," Levitt ventured.

"Maybe," Aidlow nodded. "Anyway, it starts off with two fellers jawing about when a hog gets to be pork. I quit there."

"Yes, Ivanhoe," Levitt identified Scott's immortal classic. "Knights and jousts, portcullis and dungeon keep, lance, cross bow and long bow. Delightful."

"Franklin used to talk about things of that sort," Aidlow warmed slightly. "I remember that he used to tell about how those tin outfitted men thought their whole job in life was to hunt for Holy Quail, but I never made out just what it was."

"The Holy Grail," Levitt translated reverently, "a priceless chalice, worthy of their devoted quest and which——"

"Speakin' of bows," Jennison cut in on Levitt's rhapsody, "leads square up to your trouble with the Injuns. How about it?"

Aidlow shivered, his face lost its ruddy glow and into his eyes crept a look of haunting fear, bordering on madness.

V

I'VE had two men killed," he said huskily, "and I don't know how many cattle. Guess I told you that before. One of the Injuns I hung, I mean Franklin's brother-in-law, told me just before we swung him off, that I'd pay. God knows I have. Another week

of it and the only man I'll have left here will be Ples Cantrell. He ain't got sense enough to be scared. Came in one morning with an arrow hole through his hat and figgered it a great joke. The other cowmen are in the same boat. None of them but Franklin have half their usual number of men. Let anything happen to us bosses and the valley would be shy of white men inside twelve hours. Except Franklin. All he has anyway are his two boys with an occasional Siwash who wanders in and wanders out."

"Mr. Aidlow," Jennison shifted to what seemed an entirely irrelevant question, "do you do your own hoss shoeing?"

"We don't shoe our horses at all," Aidlow answered. "There ain't a rock on my range. Why?"

"Nothing," Jennison smiled disarmingly. "I jest happened to think of it. And while we're off the main trail, I'll ask foolish question number two. When did this Prince man lose his mustache shelf? Also who amputated the same?"

"Well," Aidlow answered, "it happened two years ago at Dido, in a saloon there. Ples Cantrell did it." At the snorts of disgust, he hastened to add an apology.

"You can't blame him much," he defended his maiming cowhand. "Ples was battling Prince's foreman, Duke Adams, a big, hard man if there ever was one. Down on the floor side by side, a kicking, gouging affair from what they've told me. And then this man Prince horned up to the feed trough with his gun, held by the barrel, trying for a knockout lick at Ples's head. Someway Ples grabbed him down and when the shindy ended about a half minute after, Prince had parted company with his upper lip."

"Bitin', gougin' men I hates," Jennison asserted, "but mebby in this case he was inside of justice. Likely it ain't sweetened Mr. Prince up to you and yours."

"He never did like me," Aidlow admitted freely. "Since then if hate could kill, I'd not have lasted twenty-four hours. I think he's stark raving crazy."

"What direction does his insanity take?" Levitt queried with professional interest.

"Well, he don't hate himself," Aidlow assured Levitt. "In my judgment there's nothing he wouldn't do, nothing."

"Purty picture you've drawed by word of mouth," Jennison said dryly. "And now comin' square back to your own problems. You think Injuns have been peltin' you with arrows, but I misdoubt it." He turned to Levitt.

"Git that short shanked arrow, Doc, and that arrow head we dug outen Jimmy's hoss. Mebby it'll chirp a tune for Mr. Aidlow."

LEVITT returned with them presently, the arrow point cradled carefully in a bit of curled up bark. Jennison pointed to the arrow.

"Doc claims," he explained, "and he knows most everything, that no straight bow can drive a short arrow like that with the punch this one undoubted had. Consequent he says that somebody's usin' a cross-bow on you and your cattle. Ever know of a Siwash usin't a cross-bow?"

"No, I never did," and Aidlow shook his head in vast bewilderment.

"Ever see anybody in this here valley who did use one?" Jennison pursued his lead.

"No," Aidlow began, then stopped short. "Say, one of Prince's men did," he explained. "Shot the big toe of his left foot off with a pistol and went sour on firearms. Made a cross-bow out of a mountain yew and wouldn't use anything else. Got so he could knock over a rabbit mighty handy. Name was Robin Hood. But he's gone and has been for quite a spell. No, I don't know where he went to. Seemed like he just drifted. Had a row with Prince, I heard."

"I reckon you never seen Mr. Robin

Hood with any of these here home-made arrow points," Jennison remarked.

Aidlow bent gingerly above the arrow point, then looked up.

"Hammered out of a horse shoe nail," he observed. "No, that Robin Hood used arrowheads made special by a blacksmith at Dido. But I've got to admit that you've sort of knocked out my theory that I'm being deviled by Injuns. Even so, you ain't made my burden any lighter."

"I reckon at that, you ain't toting much more weight than Prince and Wingate," Steve Donaldson remarked philosophically. "Wingate figgers that Prince is putting in his nights poisoning his cattle and Prince figgers Wingate's got a pack of mad dogs corralled on his place which he sifts one at a time onto Prince's range. No wonder they're both crazy."

"In the said which," Jennison asserted, "Prince is prob'ly wrong. Wingate, at my guess, ain't kennelin' them dogs on his range."

The men looked at him quickly and in answer to a sputter of questions, Jennison amplified his statement. And he gave voice to a theory, old as folklore itself.

"A mad dog," said he, "won't cross running water. Consequent them dogs ain't this side of Halleluiah Crick. Unless," he grinned, "somebody's ferryin' 'em cross, or mebby carryin' 'em on their ponies. Handlin' a mad dog's got its tough p'ints, and Mr. Prince oughta figger on that before he files his claim again' Mr. Wingate. My bet is that them dogs is on HIS side of the crick."

"I know a mad dog won't cross water," Old Bud Wiley placed his imprimatur solidly on the ancient belief. "Consequently, what you say, Bat, sounds so."

"It IS so," Jennison asserted dogmatically. "Them dogs is percalatin' onto Prince's range frum his side of the crick."

"What do you mean, Bat?" Milt Scougal asked swiftly. "Do you figger Prince is crazy enough to turn mad dogs loose deliberately against his own men and cows?"

"Crazy men," Jennison observed judicially, "do anything. That's one way we know they're crazy. Still and but, I ain't statin' it only as a mebby. At that it's worth lookin' into."

UNNOTICED by the group of men a horseman had ridden up. Twenty yards away probably, when they noticed him, they got their first glimpse of Bacon Wingate. An old man they found him, gray of whiskers and hair, yet the easy way he sat his horse belied the plain evidence of his age. Pulling up his horse, he observed the group silently for a long moment out of unblinking pale gray eyes. Now he spoke to Aidlow, and there was the ring of youth in his deep tones.

"Prince just rode down," he related, "and he give me some orders." He paused in his tale long enough to bestow on his enemy the title that cracked like the lash of a bull whip. Jennison smiled, for Wingate was without a doubt a master of torrid speech. Compliments to Prince delivered, he went on. "He give me orders to leave, to vamoose, inside of forty-eight hours. Said I could gather up what's left of my cattle by then. And if I don't he's going to clean me out. He hinted that you'd help him."

Aidlow did not get up and his answer was crisp enough in all conscience.

"I don't like you, Wingate," he said without qualifications. "But if Josephus Prince told you I'd help him, that son-of-a-skunk lied."

"As for that," Wingate nodded, "it's mutual. But if you and Prince come, you'll find me and my boys on the firing line."

He squinted hard at Jennison and his comrades and his lips curled scornfully.

"I see," he sneered, "you've dragged in outside help."

It cut Jennison to the quick.

"Mr. Wingate," he said stormily, you're bad mistook. Me and my

pards are square men. But from what we've heard per Mr. Aidlow, we don't know what's right and what's wrong in this damned valley. We don't know who's square and who's crooked, and we've gotta know before we trunnel out our artillery." He got up and walked out to where Wingate now sat staring down his saddle horn.

"Tell me your tale," Jennison invited, "and just hit the high spots."

Not many minutes later to Jennison's already jumbled mass of disorganized facts and fancies, Wingate had added his store. Jennison smiled faintly.

"Some of it ticks in tune and some don't," he said picturesquely. "But what's true tune, is the question. Anyway, Prince give you forty-eight hours. If I was you I wouldn't gather up all my stock today."

Wingate looked hard at the little man.

"Stranger," he smiled presently, "that's good speaking. And you bet I'll act on it. I wish you'd come down and see me."

"I'll drop down soon, if not sooner," Jennison grinned. "So long."

WITHOUT another word, Wingate whirled his horse about and set a rapid pace for his own range. Jennison turned to his goggling friends.

"No mistake," he interrupted Aidlow's protest a bit crisply. "Twenty-four hours may tell us a lot we don't know now. And appearances is more than seldom a prime deceiver, Mr. Aidlow."

"You may be right," Aidlow admitted without interest. "You may be right."

He stifled a yawn, then got up.

"I didn't sleep last night," he said wearily, "and I believe I'll take a little nap. Call me about eleven-thirty and we'll throw together another meal."

As he disappeared into the house, Whispering Thompson unleashed a question that had been seething in his mighty chest for many a long minute.

"Bat," he demanded, "what made you ask Aidlow whether they shod their own horses? I know good and well you had a reason, but what was it?"

"Whisperin'," Jennison answered soberly, "thar was a reason behind it which I'll tell you boys. Remember fust that these cross-bow arrows are p'inted with horse shoe nails. Well, when Cantrell was crawlin' outen the corral where you'd tossed him, a NEW HORSE SHOE NAIL dropped from his pocket!"

Following a noon meal in essentials a replica of breakfast, Jennison announced that he was riding up to talk with Cris Franklin. His restless mind was hard on the trail of a mystery and he had but forty-eight hours in which to solve it. Levitt, intrigued with Aidlow's remark that Franklin had books, elected to accompany Jennison and presently the two were on their way to see Franklin.

The house of the other cattlemen hugged the pan of the valley floor, but Franklin's sat in lofty estate on a flattened terrace where a sprinkling of sugar pines had trickled down from the mountain above.

Within a couple of miles they were on Franklin's land, the poorest in the entire valley. Scab rock abounded and more than once their horses plowed through the tail of a fan shaped talus of shale rock. Jennison reflected that in all probability, Franklin found it necessary to shoe his ponies. Four miles from Aidlow's and they were in touching distance of Franklin's home.

And it was a home, not an unlovely slatternly cabin like Aidlow's bachelor's quarters. Built of logs squared with an adz, it had a certain dignified air, nestling there among a half-dozen pine trees. And flowers. With near ecstasy, Jennison, an incurable Jayhawker, saw his beloved state emblem nodding sedately in the light breeze. Evidence of refinement, without the knowledge that Franklin possessed books and a telescope. The latter was plainly visible on a platform anchored securely to the boles of four trees, their tops lopped

off twenty feet or so from the ground.

The added height insured a commanding view of the entire valley. On the shaded front porch sat a rather small man, his short cropped black whiskers graying at the chin. Jennison and Levitt pulled their horses up before the gate and Jennison greeted the owner who had not even risen at their approach.

"MR. FRANKLIN," he said sunnily. "Them cart wheel sunflowers bobbin' thar in the yard sure makes me think of Kansas. 'T'ain't likely you're a Jayhawker like me?"

Franklin jerked swiftly erect.

"Jayhawker!" he exclaimed as he hurried down the flat rock walk. "Why, I was with John Brown at Ossawatami. I——"

"Say," Jennison interrupted, "I knowed Old John Brown and all his sons. Also Jim Lane. I was at Lawrence when we had our fust battle with the boys from across the border."

"And I was there when it was burned," Franklin continued the exegis in chronological way, "and sat in the first territorial legislature. Get down you two and come in. We've got a lot to talk about, that's certain."

They dismounted and Jennison introduced Levitt and himself.

"Doc here," he declared with abundant faith in the all embracing statement, "is the smartest man in the United States, mebby in the world. When he heard you had a herd of books, you couldn't a kept him away with a howitzer."

"I have some books," Franklin smiled, "and it will be a pleasure to show them."

"The pleasure will be mine," Levitt said urbanely. "Truth to tell, my reading is sadly in arrears."

"Let's go into the house," Franklin said hospitably. Then he stopped short. An earlier thought had risen through the momentarily obstructing cloud of ancient Kansan memories. Cold and hard were his words.

"You men," he accused, "have been for some hours at Sid Aidlow's. I saw you through the telescope. And," his ending left no space for misconstruction, "Aidlow's friends cannot be my guests. Consider the invitation withdrawn, gentlemen," he said stiffly. "Good day."

Levitt, cultured man, accepted the rebuff as a gentleman. He bowed slightly and moved in dignified way toward his horse. Not so Bat Jennison. Made of sturdy unbending stuff, he recognized the surface justice of Franklin's cool dismissal solely. Besides he had come with a set purpose, not merely to hear honied words or otherwise. So far from being rebuked, his doughty soul rebelled, yet wisely.

"Mr. Franklin," he suggested in friendly way, "jest put the 'whoa' a minute on your gitaway. She's a fact me and my friends have been at Aidlow's fur a few hours and has et of his provinder twice. Thankin' him fur the grub as we do, still and but that don't make us dyed in the wool friends of his'n."

"It points to some things, however," Franklin insisted stubbornly.

"Jes exactly, P'INTS," Jennison said succinctly. "Mebby you'll be intrusted to know that the six of us have been minin' fur a month or more back in the Perdition Mountains, comin' in from the Soames' Bar way. We run outen man fodder and takin' a hint from an Injun, hit out fur Dido, aimin' to regrub. We didn't know this said valley was here till last night when we minced outen the foot hills. But I'll admit we've heard considerable since, first from a man with a minus lip, then some more from Aidlow and last by chanct from Wingate. I was hopin' to pick up a few more kernels for the hopper from you. We then could mebby grind out some honest to goodness truth flour."

"If you're not a friend of Aidlow's," Franklin persisted, "how does it come you land at his place? If you're a stranger, how is it that within a few hours you take on yourself to straighten up the affairs in the valley?"

LEVITT up to this time had maintained a dignified silence, but now at the insinuations draped about his sterling friend, he took fire. Drawing up his commanding figure to its full height, he fixed the obdurate Franklin with a cold eye.

"Mr. Franklin," he said frostily, "it is evident that you need instruction. Mr. Jennison most emphatically is not a meddler nor an officious busybody, as one might infer from your language. You have read, I am informed, of knights errant. You see one now in the flesh. And a deal more successful. But if this is your answer to him, I have only one more word for you, sir. You may go to hell! Bat, let us away."

"And whilst not crownin' myself with none of the alarrions which Doc has heaved my way," Jennison contributed, "I'm endorsin' his end remark in whole and in totum. Go to hell!"

Intelligent above the ordinary, Franklin had reconsidered his first judgment and made another decision by the time his two peppery callers had reached the gate.

"Wait a moment, gentlemen," he cried after them. When they had turned about still angry, still puzzled, he tendered them a verbal olive branch.

"I was too hasty," he admitted with simple dignity, "and owe you an apology. But," he went on to justify his conduct, "we men here in this valley have had enough harrowing experiences in the last few weeks to make us suspect everyone. We hate, we fear. I admit it without shame. Brave men can face without qualing open dangers, but may tremble before the inexplicable."

Jennison thawed instantly. Here was bedrock sincerity, unless Franklin was a superb actor. He nodded to Levitt.

"Mr. Franklin," Jennison said simply, "me and Doc ain't blamin' you fur blowin' off your boilers. Let's leave it thar. And now if you'll let Doc into your books, you and me can trade a few faded memories about Kansas times and mebby come a mite closer to home later."

VI

FOR the time and place, Franklin possessed a remarkable library. To Levitt, long deprived of the companionship of books, they came like a table d'hote to a gourmet who had subsisted for months on hog and hominy. With an almost reverential air, he inspected them. Shakespeare, Dante, Byron, Rollin's ANCIENT HISTORY, Dana's PRINCIPLES OF GEOLOGY and a new book, THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES by Charles Darwin. With a sigh of contentment, Levitt picked out this book and settled himself in a home-made willow chair.

"A good book and a comfortable chair," Levitt philosophized. "What could add to a man's happiness?"

"A drink, perhaps," Franklin hazarded smilingly as he started from the room. Presently he returned with a bottle and three glasses. Drinking a toast, dedicated to mutual amenities and refilling Levitt's glass to the brim, they left the enchanted doctor to his fairyland while they reverted to realities. Sitting down on the front porch, they revived scenes long past and experiences vivid despite the swift tread of years. They had known men in common, had visited the same towns and settlements, had traveled identical roads and trails. An hour perhaps of this and then without conscious volition, they were back in this valley now facing its perplexing problems.

"We hate each other," Franklin had said without great exhibition of passion. It was more as if stating a thing by rote. Jennison had heard it already from Wingate and Aidlow, but with varying emphasis.

"And you all and several are et up with mutual suspicion," Jennison contributed.

"Naturally," Franklin agreed. "Though I must admit in all fairness that I have been the least hurt."

"What do I think of Prince?" he said in answer to the direct question. "I think he's insane." After a moment

he all but traversed an earlier remark made by Aidlow. "I believe he's shoving those dogs loose on the range himself and it wouldn't surprise me if he's back of some of the other deviltry. Of course," he said inclusively, "I believe that Wingate and Aidlow are capable of it too, but to me the signs indicate that so far as the mad dogs, at any rate, are concerned, it's his work."

"What signs?" Jennison inquired.

Franklin told him, but to Jennison they seemed somewhat vague and he said so.

"Them signs don't look even like more'n faint hints to me."

Now he glanced up to the tree supported platform and its shining telescope. Perhaps he looked wistfully, for Franklin's next remark was a near invitation to inspect it at closer range.

"I can see the rings of Saturn with that telescope," he stated.

"Who's Satrun?" Jennison demanded out of his abysmal ignorance. "Some Injun chief?"

"No," Franklin smiled faintly, "one of the stars. The mountains on the moon show up very plainly too."

"Mr. Franklin," Jennison said firmly, "I've seen rings about the moon and sun and consequent ain't disputin' of your fust statement. But when you try to gull me about mountains on the moon, I hedge my bets. Anybody can see that she's slick as a peeled onion."

"Sometime come up and take a look at it yourself," was Franklin's reply. "That's the only way you'll be convinced."

"Yep, I'm stubborn," Jennison chuckled agreeably. "Also ign'runt. Still, I'm damned happy."

THE platform stood somewhat apart from the house and to reach it they passed a small building. Jennison glanced in through the open door to discover that it was a blacksmith shop. A keg, its rim fringed with straddled horse shoes caught his eye and suggested an artful remark.

"I notice you shoe your own hosses," he said carelessly.

"Have to," Franklin replied. "I've got a lot of shale rock on my ranch. Knocks the ponies' hoofs out in a hurry. But I haven't shod a horse for a good six weeks."

"Why?" Jennison asked.

"Because somebody stole my box of horseshoe nails," came the astonishing answer. "Got to send to Dido for more before I can set another shoe. The thing that puzzles me," he went on, "is why anybody would steal a thing like that. Prince is the only other man in here who shoes his horses and he wouldn't run out of nails. Funny."

Jennison thinking keenly of the arrows headed with new horseshoe nails that were decimating men and animals on Aidlow's range could only echo Franklin's remark.

"Yep, it's sure funny."

Were Franklin's Indian friends the tidy thieves, or was it just a clever remark to pass suspicion in some other direction? Jennison would have given something to know. And for a long moment he flirted with another question, which caution urged that he should not ask. And won the decision. Bows, Franklin knew, but how about cross-bows? And if Jennison had asked it, what would Franklin have answered?

The two men climbed the ladder leading to the platform and when the focal rod had worked its magic of adjustment, Jennison found the valley wonderfully contracted. Across the valley to the west, what had appeared to his unaided eye as a warty blemish, was resolved into the house and attendant buildings and corrals, properties of Josephus Prince. A half circle swing to the north and he was inspecting the ranch buildings of Bacon Wingate. Depressing the tube was like looking at Sid Aidlow's home from a quarter of mile removed. Charmed by the near miracle of it all, he felt that he could hear Whispering Thompson's mighty diapason and could see Steve

Donaldson spit. Franklin interrupted him to ask,

"Is your friend really a doctor?"

"Best in the United States," Jennison assured him with eye still glued to the telescope. Franklin considered a bandaged left thumb.

"Got something in it," he explained. "Guess I'll go down and let him take a look at it. Stay up here and amuse yourself as long as you want to."

"All right," Jennison responded. "Think I'll peek round a mite longer."

FRANKLIN descended the ladder while Jennison returned to his projected task of inspecting the surrounding ramparts of foothills and mountains. Abruptly they rose with an impetuosity that made it difficult to say where foothill disappeared and mountain succeeded. Jennison found it to be an intriguing study. Then out of the welter of peaks and crags and turret-like cliffs, his keen eye picked out an item of peculiar interest. Two miles away, south by west on a threadlike path nudging around a shoulder of rock, he saw a man. And knew him beyond mistake. Here in the flesh was the man of their morning camp, the man of the limp. But it was not even the man that contributed the tantalizing problem but the identity of that other object in that composite picture. For if Jennison upon his life had been compelled to name it, he would have said that at the heels of his man of somber mystery, crawled on hands and knees another man! And as he registered this firm conviction, both figures crept round the elbow of reddish rock and disappeared.

Voices below now claimed Jennison's attention, two persons conversing in the Indian tongue, as understandable to him as simple English. Peering over the edge of the platform, he made them out at the corner of the cabin, a woman and a man, wife of Franklin and one of his sons. That Jennison himself was the subject was evident from the son's guttural query.

"What does the little chipmunk up on the platform?"

Nor was the mother's sibilant contribution less pointed or less disdainfully personal.

"The chipmunk is a spy," she hissed, "and thy father is as ever a fool. For did he not lead him there?"

"A dead spy is more to be desired than a live one," the son remarked sententiously.

"It is a true saying," the mother nodded. "Yet," she added "thy gun makest a noise and that is not well."

Jennison's immediate maneuver was predicated on the hope that he might keep the surly half-breed from an act of supreme folly. And it was utterly foreign to his normal course of action. Blatant showmanship he loathed, but now the need was very great. Already his eye had caught the perfect setup. On a stump down toward the barnyard some person had steadied two tin cans, spaced by a matter of six inches. So now stepping to the edge of the platform and very sure that he was being watched, he dropped his hands to his pistols and fired through the open ended holsters. At the simultaneous explosions, the cans were dusted from the stump. As a feat of gunmanship, it was impressive. The pair below turned and nodded at each other just as the front door spewed forth Levitt and Franklin on their way out to discover the meaning of the sudden fusillade. Jennison waved cheerful greeting.

"Jest tryin' out my eye on a purty target," he grinned down at the gaping two. "Sorry, gents, if I upset you. Nothin' drilled but a pair of tin cans."

Franklin, sensing something more than aerial target practice on Jennison's part, turned sharply and hurled at his wife and son two guttural Indian words.

"Take care," he warned.

AS JENNISON began to clamber down from the platform, Franklin noticed that Levitt had

emerged with "The Origin of Species" clasped in his hand.

"Take the book along with you, Doctor," he smiled understandingly. "Later you can return it at your leisure."

"Thanks," Levitt said warmly. "A book to me is like a canteen of water to a man perishing of thirst in a desert. And as to that finger," he added professionally, "I think there is no danger of gangrene. However, if it does not behave let me know."

With hand on saddle horn, Jennison halted at the stirring of a sudden thought.

"Somebody told me, Mr. Franklin," he said inquiringly, "that you've gotta spring that spouts more sand than water."

"Well hardly that," Franklin distinguished, "but it does run a lot of sand. I never saw one like it before. It's a curiosity that you should see."

"Goin' to," Jennison assured him. "Where's she located?"

"Down yonder," Franklin pointed. "A mile, possibly. You'll regret it if you pass it up."

"Here's one time I ain't passin'," Jennison grinned. "We'll be seein' you soon. So long."

For a time the two men rode on in silence, Levitt communing silently with the English genius discovered to him in the book, Jennison engaged in a stubborn tussle with the thorny problem of the valley and its somber mysteries. At length he turned in his saddle.

"Doc," he said earnestly, "you've got the smartest brain I'm ever meetin' with checkin' out tough rebuses. Listen."

Briefly he told what he had heard and seen while atop the platform.

"What," he asked finally, "did Franklin's KLOOTCH and the boy mean by namin' me a spy?"

Levitt had a suggestion that looked like a plausible solution.

"Well," he posed the problem, "Franklin has a valuable mine hidden somewhere and you announced that we are miners. Is it unnatural to suppose that that was what they meant? To me, that is the logical answer. And as to what Franklin meant when he rebuked the two, my surmise is this. He knew, or guessed what they were thinking and so warned them against foolish violence. A charming man, in my opinion."

"You're mebby right," Jennison conceded a bit doubtfully. "What'd you find wrong with his finger?"

"Bat," Levitt said with a twinkle in his eye, "I've a mind not to tell you, you're so deductive, not to say suspicious by nature and training."

"What was it?" Jennison insisted.

"A bit of metal. You might even call it a sliver."

"Frum what?"

"I believe that it came from a horse shoe nail."

Without conscious reason the two men halted to look back toward Franklin's house. Some one was using the telescope, a fact obvious from flashing scintillations as the lens caught and reflected the sunlight. Not only using it, but plainly shifting it from object to object, all lying toward the west. Levitt observed the alternate flashes and turned to Jennison with the remark:

"Bat, that's not unlike a heliograph."

"What's that, Doc?" Jennison queried with interest.

"A set of mirrors with which messages may be sent," Levitt informed him. "Much like the telegraph, only the dots and dashes are flashes leaping from the mirrors."

"Wonder if that is bein' so used," Jennison speculated. "Anyway, it's worth thinkin' about. Guess we might as well ride on."

VII

PRESENTLY they reached the point where Franklin's pointing finger had located the phenomenal spring. Again Jennison pulled up his horse. Below them was a shallow box

canyon more wooded than any other part of the valley they had seen. A series of springs seeped from the closed end of the cul-de-sac, to creep in lazy fashion as a creek of sorts toward the Halleluiah Creek.

Bushes and trees, alder, birch and a few scrub oak made of the floor something of a brush park. Jennison, having heard of the place, would inspect it. Not so, Levitt, absorbed in his book.

Accordingly they parted, Levitt riding slowly on perusing as he rode, Jennison turning down into the snug little amphitheater. His eye caught again the twinkling flashes from the telescope as his horse slid down over the lip of the canyon wall, then it and Levitt were tucked from sight.

Presumptively shielded by prior knowledge against surprise, yet the reality drew from Jennison more than one gasp of astonishment. The spring bubbling up, slate colored and unhealthy looking, held in it a certain weird allurement, joined with inexplicable loathing. Finally he left it to follow down its course a bit, halting again where there were plain evidences of a ford. Even in his high heeled boots, Jennison could have jumped the little creek where the trail bent down to its track fretted edge. But had he been gifted with the eyes of an eagle, he could not have glimpsed its bed through that thin smear of discolored water. Like an emulsion of pale oil it slid by without ripple or sound to mark its depth or speed or current. He dismounted to examine it at close range, while his pony tested it doubtfully and voted it out as a beverage.

At the wrinkled nose lifted by his beloved Sunflower, Jennison chuckled softly, then his gaze returned to the sleepy stream. Just below the ford it widened into a pot-shaped hole twenty feet across at a hazard and of an unguessable depth. A cottonwood, overthrown by the spring freshet, spanned the pool like a well placed foot log, and some brush and some trees lined the flat walled basin.

Peaceful and harmless it looked to the casual eye, yet Jennison was not deceived. That greasy mirror was backed with a treacherous quicksand and he was well informed as to its perils. Yet at that very moment a cold and calculating fate was cunningly baiting this monstrous trap for his destruction.

SO NOW as he stood there scowling at the unlovely pool, he heard a cry of distress, its place of origin for the moment unknown. But for a moment only. It came from a cluster of refuse about midway of the pool lodged rakishly in the crotch of a dead branch atop the fallen log.

"Whilst she's nothin' but a frog," Jennison catalogued aloud, "still and but said frog's into a peck of trouble. Reckon I'll hafta go and look-see."

Leaping the creek he advanced to the end of the log. Here he paused momentarily while a man hidden well in the bushes sighted along a crossbow, its deadly bolt trained between Jennison's shoulders. And he still waited, the arrow centered on his human target while Jennison walked circumspectly out upon the none-too-stable log.

Even when Jennison paused directly above the point of commotion his view was obstructed, so bending down he drew the curtain aside. The one thing he feared and loathed was very near, a snake snuggled in a trash net, a croaking frog half swallowed. Seeming to sense the intrusion, the beady lidless eyes shifted aloft and instantly the sinuous body, pointed with the helpless frog, lashed upward.

Had it been the cold relentless eye of a gunman boring into Jennison's above the shiny barrel of a six shooter, the little man would have ready answer, two in fact, in the holsters strapped to his lean thighs. But this noisome thing that all but prodded him in the face swirled him into a mad panic.

If he had stood on an acre-wide patch

of ground rather than a narrow slippery footlog, his reaction could have been no different. That wild unreasoning leap for safety where no danger threatened, brought him feet first into the middle of the pool facing the ford. When it ended, momentarily, the mud was above his knees, the water line just short of his hips. The man with the cross-bow divined, rather than saw, and leaning his bow against a tree, he swarmed upward a matter of twenty feet. Here a crotch furnished footing, a mass of leaves a perfect screen.

The sight amply repaid his labors, if his huge grin told truth. They say that a drowning man in these last fleet seconds before unconsciousness mutes his memories, sees unrolled before him a swiftly moving panorama of his life.

So it was with Jennison, only the TEMPO was vastly swifter, all compassed within the split second between the moment his feet touched the crest of the mud barrier until they came to a near stop. A near stop, but nothing more. Like things alive the grains of sand crawled slowly from beneath his boot soles as fractional inch by fractional inch his body was engulfed. He could neither break nor slacken that inexorable vise, something like half set cement, somewhat like fluid glue.

When those first brief wrenchings ended futilely, Jennison ceased his struggles and in calmness and utter sanity considered his fearful predicament. First though he did a thing so characteristic of the man that it must be recorded. His frantic leap from the log had dislodged the snake and the half-swallowed frog. Floundering clear of the debris, the snake swam heavily toward the rim of the pool and crawled slowly up the bank. As it came to a stop, Jennison drew a pistol and with one sure shot blew the body apart just back of the head. And with genuine satisfaction he watched the frog wriggle out from the nerveless jaws and move halteringly away.

Maimed indeed but free, while the man whose self forgetfulness was great enough to accomplish the merciful deed was gripped by bonds more appalling. These acts were matters merely of fractional seconds. Then he remembered Levitt, riding serenely off across the prairie. If chance favored, Jennison might win him back, or possibly some other rider. So he emptied the four shots remaining in his pistol, reloaded it and fired again. But in vain. Help from any outside source was denied him.

JENNISON looked at his horse and with emotions utterly beyond the cataloguing noted the rope coiled at his saddle bow. With one end in his hands and the other snubbed about his saddle horn escape would be but a matter of seconds. Or even the flossy tail of Sunflower, his saddle pony, could work the miracle of rescue. For a long tantalizing moment he dallied with the delusion. But to clutch his fingers in that flowing mop Sunflower must be lured into the pool itself. Even if this were fantastically possible two victims would inevitably be the toll of the deadly quicksand. It was a wistful folly dismissed almost in the moment of its conception.

There remained, however, the flimsy possibility of human aid. So now he fired another fusillade of shots and called twice at the utmost capacity of his lungs, then thrust the empty gun back into its holster. As for his second pistol, he lifted it out of its scabbard and snuggled it inside his shirt. And he did it with a set purpose. His death when it arrived would come smoking from his own gun.

A great silence followed his shots. Meanwhile he bade farewell to things he loved. The sun drenched slopes of the towering hills, the snowy peaks of two distant mountains, the grass, the trees, his beloved pony, all claimed their part in what was akin to worship. And then an undefined misty hope stirred him, grew wondrously as it gathered distinctness and form and in a clipped second had attained all the

dignity of a concrete plan. The song of a bird teetering on a trim twig almost above his head had wrought this stupendous magic. Jennison had canted his head back, looked once then drew his breath in sharply; the warbler instantly forgotten in an absorbed contemplation of his perch. For the twig that held the songster joined another large enough to be called a small limb which in its turn shot out from the trunk of the slender tree itself. And that tree was a Mountain Yew, the toughest and least breakable wood in all his experience.

Once let him get that tip of that six inch trunk within his grasp and the quicksand would lose its terrors. For although the lowest branch was a full half dozen feet above his empty fingers yet he had the means to woo it into his hands. A habit that had earned him a lot of chaffing made this seeming miracle possible. In season and out, Jennison wore his Stetson jammed down to the clips of his generous ears. The nub of the thing was simply this. Wound about his hat was a heavy fish line SANS the more modern leader, but equipped with a stout hook. And as Jennison glimpsed the bird and the lower outflung branch, he remembered this line and a way of escape came in that fleeting moment.

NEVERTHELESS, he moved with the slow speed advised by a very wise Latin philosopher. Removing his hat he clamped the brim between his teeth while he loosened the hookless end of the line and tied it firmly through the top buttonhole of his shirt. Next with the hook pricked firmly into his collar he unwound the line and tossed his hat over on the bank. Then he drew his knife, extracted a cartridge from his belt, snipped off a bit of lead and using his competent teeth for a vise, clamped it about the line just above the shank of the hook. With great care he now spread his line out on the water and when he was certain that no snarls would mar his chances, was ready for his cast.

And this iron-nerved man who left nothing to chance first made two preliminary casts trying merely for distance and height before he aimed for that lower limb. Aimed for and trapped it a foot short of the end just where an upbend guaranteed sure anchorage. How gently inch by inch he drew his captive downward, how as the leafy end dipped nearer and nearer, the sweat beads started on his forehead, how when one more inch and the deed would be accomplished, he mastered the mad impulse to snatch for it, how at last his fingers did close over his priceless treasure, all those were detached yet continuing elements in a drama impossible to put into words.

With masterful patience he loosened the hook and stuck it firmly in the lapel of his collar before he began to work from that insignificant outpost to his goal, the tree itself. Levering down slowly on the captured limb, he grasped a larger, then a third, a fourth, until in time he had drawn the top of the tree itself within reach. And its tough fibers held while he bent it into a perfect arch. Already bubbles were seeping up about his legs as now he began to win release from the clutching mud. And it came almost suddenly though his boots remained behind, a tribute to this novel jack. With a side sway the tree straightened somewhat and swerved toward the bank. Jennison's grip relaxed, his body sprawled limply, legs to the hips still in the water. With half of his body all but paralyzed, the upper half must act. For as he made that final desperate swing toward the bank and safety, an arrow had swished by vengefully. And near! Had Jennison even a moderate goitre, the arrow surely would have nicked him. So as he lay there, half out of the water, with wobbly fingers he drew and cocked his pistol. Looked carefully around to find the place that concealed the enemy who was trying to end his life just as he had won it back.

THE man in the tree had simply delayed too long. With huge satisfaction he had watched Jennison as the quicksand slowly engulfed him. That he could escape seemed the imaginings of a madman. So Jennison's efforts to lasso the elusive limb provoked belly-shaking mirth in the aerial onlooker. Nor did he awake from his lethargy until Jennison had secured firm anchorage on the top of the tree itself and had begun that churning rotary motion that was in time to win him freedom.

Now with an ugly scowl, the man reached for his pistol, half drew it, then decided against this common mode of eliminating those he hated. It must be the cross-bow and poisoned arrow way out for this inquisitive stranger. But the cross-bow was on the ground and the scrambling effort to reach it resulted in some delay, a tatter of shirt left hanging on an obstreperous limb and bitter words at a shred of hide misplaced.

He had, therefore, but time to loose one hasty arrow as Jennison slid to the rim of the pool. Two things prevented a further attack. First, the fact that Jennison was doubtless still able to shoot. Second, and decisive as the man toyed with that deliberate question, he caught sight of an approaching horseman. The question was settled for him automatically. Sliding back into the bushes, he glided like a snake upon his saddle horse and like a snake disappeared, just as Doc Levitt topped the ridge above the quicksand pool.

"My God, Bat, what happened?" Levitt gasped out at sight of Jennison's sprawled and bedraggled body.

"Git down, Doc," Jennison chattered a hoarse warning. "A damned Siwash jest tried to auger me with an arrow. Come from over in thar," he warned feebly. "S'pose you comb 'em with lead."

Levitt jerked out his pistol and sent five bullets clattering among the trees and bushes.

"Likely skedaddled when he seen you comin'," Jennison suggested through clacking teeth. "Anyway, that shellin' will likely help him on his way."

Levitt waited a moment tense and watchful for any hostile response, but only the wind whispering idle nothings to the leaves rewarded his alert ears. He turned to Jennison with the dry observation,

"No encores, Bat, from any audience that is, or was. How'd you get in such a fix?"

Jennison explained briefly amid their united efforts to restore at least a modicum of circulation to limbs grown torpid through emersion in the frigid mud and water. Soon Jennison hobbled gamely to his feet and with Levitt's assistance climbed into his saddle. Together they crossed the tiny stream and within a dozen yards came to the stunted oak and its surrounding bushes. Dismounting they studied the ground for clews of the enemy. Tracks seemed absent, but they were not long in finding where his pony had stood. Jennison returned to the tree.

"From the angle of that said arrow," he observed practically, "that buzzard was roostin' in this here tree." He gazed up toward the handy crotch that had served the bowman for a perch and his eye lighted. He had spied the telltale shred of shirt riven away by the stubby limb. He pointed it out. "Doc," he queried, "do you figger yourself as able to git that thar rag?" Doc did. Now with this bit of evidence stowed away in Jennison's pocket, the two turned their horses towards Aidlow's.

THEY had traveled a half mile or so when a rider popped up out of a slight ravine and angled across the prairie to intercept them. It was Ples Cantrell, his face bearing eloquent testimony to the driving power of Steve Donaldson's fists. His one serviceable eye took in greedily Jennison's muddied condition and his greeting was of the sort that puts a strain on tempers ever so serene.

"Well, you old snapping turtle," he

jibed. "You look like you'd just crawled out of the mud to sun yourself. Ever try riding in boots? Damned sight more comfortable than in your sock feet."

"Mr. Cantrell," Doc Levitt retorted swiftly, "your style of humor will probably be subdued some time with a noose. I would hope soon."

"Touchy," Cantrell chuckled comment. "Well, I ain't. I just rode over to see if Jimmy Jones' horse was dead for certain and he was. See you later."

And spurring his pony, he galloped on toward Aidlow's. Levitt observed his bobbing back for a long moment silently, then he turned to Jennison.

"Bat," he said, "if modesty in the open market was quoted at a thousand dollars per ounce, Cantrell couldn't draw down a slick quarter. On that commodity he's simply bankrupt."

Jennison, his mind leagues away, heard his friend, yet did not hear.

"The superlative truth," he murmured. Then he pulled his horse up short.

"Doc," he said with startling suddenness, "I've got it!" Before Levitt could even intrude the thin wedge of a natural question, Jennison was rattling on. "Yep, I see it clean through from Dan to Bathsheba. Listen close whilst I unspools it."

Levitt listened gravely, judicially and without interruption. At the end he nodded.

"I believe you're right, Bat, and I'll not embarrass you by saying it's clever thinking. You know that as well as I. But by George," he added in crescendo, "somebody beside you, Bat, is clever and diabolical."

When they arrived in the vicinity of Aidlow's ranch house, Jennison looked about for Cantrell, but did not see him. Evidently no rumor even had reached his friends of his recent peril. Now as they crowded up full of explosive questions, Levitt gave them a brief account of what had happened. Jennison, ever a sort of mystic, added a solemn sentence.

"If it hadn't been fur Doc's blessed hunch to come back, she's probable yours truly would now be decked out in a brand new pair of wings."

"And somebody tried to harpoon you with a pizened arrow," Thompson bellowed wrathfully. "Let's saddle up, boys, and go get the damned thus and so."

"No use, Whisperin'," Jennison grinned down at his bellicose friend, "fur two good and ample reasons. Fust is he's already done flitted. Me and Doc looked. Second is you're already telegraphed him if he's still lingerin' round inside of two miles." Then he added practically. "Right now I'd like to dry out and hug a bottle of whiskey."

"I'm already dry," Levitt opined, "and because of that I also wish a drink, preferredly a pannikin of rum."

Aidlow seemed badly shaken by the savage attack on Jennison.

"My God!" he gasped, "to think that they've got bold enough to try it in the daytime even!"

"A arrow would pry jest as inquisitive into your innards by day as by night," Jennison said philosophically. "Time of said pryin' carryin' no interest to the man prodded, none whatsoever. Besides, I didn't git prodded, which is the main fact. And now how about that preordained drink?"

VIII

JENNISON might dismiss the attack with a wave of his hand, but no one else could view it so lightly. That the devil was unchained in this fair valley was their unanimous verdict. So the evening meal passed in more than the usual silence. Yet it was no petty play acting on Jennison's part. Not that the attempt had been made, but that it had failed, seemed to his matter-of-fact mind the only point of interest.

So as it grew dusk and he arose to remark casually that he was riding down to visit with Bacon Wingate, his friends to a man prepared to accompany him.

With gentleness, but firmness, he waved them aside. He had no need of a bodyguard.

Grudgingly they let him go his way. For knowing well the canny little man, they sensed the fact that he was riding that night for information upon which to buttress a sensible course of action. That he wished to go alone, proved it. It was crowding daylight when he returned.

The day was passed in leisurely fashion by the men at the ranch. During its course, Jennison managed to hold a surreptitious conversation with Aidlow and his own companions. Astonishment greeted his disclosures which at the first Aidlow was inclined to doubt. In the end, however, he yielded to evidence he could not refute. That night it was agreed, Jennison was to make full revelation to Aidlow's men. One item of interest sifted over the creek boundary during the course of the day. A mad dog had been shot that morning on Prince's range.

Every man on the ranch was there when Jennison with his pipe going, prepared to redeem his earlier promise.

"I reckon," he said meditatively, "I'll start with the mad dogs. For granting that somebody is stringin' 'em out over the range, the sticker is how. One man is handlin' 'em and he's got nerve. He's the kind of man who'd let a rattlesnake strike his bare hand with the bloody stub of his neck after you'd cut Mr. Snake's head off. They'll strike for a while, you know, when they're deheaded if you pinch their tail. Anyway this jasper's got that kind of nerve. And now about how he does it. As I've done said, he knows them dogs, and when they're jest on the brink of tumblin' over into madness, then he slips a lariat over the dog's head, snubs his jaws solid with a thong and drags him away anchored to his saddle horn. When he gits where he wants, he prob'ly pulls the dog off the ground till he's choked senseless, snips the jaw thong, slips off his rope and rides away. And barrin' a accident," he ended significantly, "that trainer of mad dogs ain't never in no personal danger."

"You couldn't describe it better," Cantrell remarked, "if you'd seen it done."

"It would be no diffrunt," Jennison said dryly. "Fur that's the way. And now we come down to who's doin all the devilment in this here valley."

EVERY one leaned nearer, while Jennison paused to light his pipe.

"It ain't reasonable," he argued, "to believe that all four of you cattlemen turned cutthroats and murderers at the same time. But one could, two mebby might. Give a man enough reasons, feed them reasons on hate and you've got the answer to this rebus. Only one man in this valley 'pears to have enough reasons to drive him to it. Prince has threatened to kill him, Wingate killed his boy, you, Aidlow, hung his wife's brother, a thing, and I say it in your molars, that you didn't have no just course to do. Remember he's tied in with the Injuns who you men chased out this valley and you've got the picture. You betcha. Cris Franklin and his two boys fill out the story."

"Damnit, Bat," Levitt disagreed sharply, "you're wrong. Franklin is a gentleman."

"I agree with Dr. Levitt," Aidlow chimed in. "He's not your man."

"Says you so," Jennison snapped back. "What do you reckon he's got that telescope fur? Why? So he can watch every move you men make in this whole valley. And signal with it, too, like he done yesterday for my benefit. Who do you figure worked out the notion of a cross-bow? Why the man, half of whose books are about bows and so forth. Doc," he appealed to Levitt direct, "ain't he long on them kind of books?"

"I admit," Levitt answered with apparent reluctance, "that he has some books that——"

"Jest so," Jennison nodded grimly. "Then add the fact that if he can chase you men outen this valley, his Injun

relations and friends can come back in peace and chew on that notion fur a spell."

"Where are the dogs, Bat?" Steve Donaldson queried.

"Penned up in a kind of cellar in the cliff back of his stable. I smelled 'em yesterday afternoon!"

"I know that place," Aidlow remarked, "and I've always wondered if it didn't hide his mine."

"Shouldn't be surprised," Jennison nodded. "A cave more'n like, and a bang up place to kennel them dogs. Him and his Injun friends stole 'em off Wingate and brung 'em thar."

"You've got a plan to end it?" Thompson intruded a question.

"A plan," Jennison said briefly. After a moment he expanded it by a sentence. "It's a loop jest big enough to circle you three boss cattlemen and me."

"Why just us?" and Aidlow seemed inclined to debate. "Why not our men and yours too?"

"You'll take it or leave it, Mr. Aidlow," Jennison said crisply. "It's us four or nothin'."

"Not by a damned long sight," Old Bud Wiley disagreed heatedly. "If you're in, we're in. Ain't I right, boys?"

A chorus of agreement from his friends still left Jennison inflexible.

IT'S jest as I laid it out," he repeated. "Nobody is counted in on this party but Mr. Aidlow and Wingate and Prince and me. And I've gotta reason. It's up to you three after we catch Franklin and his boys to set the penalty. Mebby it'll be runnin' 'em out'n the valley, mebby it'll be hangin'. I ain't goin' to decide. And us four go alone or I'm done."

Then Cantrell laughed.

"You'll have a sweet job, Mr. Jennison, bringing Prince in on anything."

"I'll ride over and see Mr. Prince," Jennison answered. "And I'll bring him."

"The spificated truth," Whispering Thompson growled an unqualified okey to Jennison's statement. "Why I remember that time at Bootleg Bar——"

Jennison hastened to cut off the forthcoming rhapsody.

"What's your answer, Mr. Aidlow?" he demanded.

"Yes," Aidlow nodded slowly.

"All right then," Jennison said briskly, "here's my plan. Franklin and his boys all sleep in the house. I found that out when I was up thar with Doc. The four of us will be on hand jest ahead of daylight. His front yard was made to order for proper cover, sunflowers, bushes and such right up to the porch. We'll hide till it comes morning then we'll nab 'em before they know anybody's within a mile. Arrested, you three cowmen can finish the job anyway it suits you."

"There don't seem to be any hitches in your plan," Aidlow admitted.

"No, she's fool proof," Jennison said complacently. "We'll send one of your boys down and bring Wingate up. I'm ridin' over shortly fur Mr. Prince. Me and him'll meet you and Wingate around two at the rock slide a half a mile, I figger, this side of Franklin's house. As fur the rest, you're furloughed for tonight. Exceptin'," he specified, "none of you can come any closer to Franklin's than here."

He got to his feet, rapped the hot dottle from his pipe and stored the redolent briar in his pocket. Then he seemed to remember something.

"I reckon before I ramp over to git Mr. Prince," he remarked, "that I might as well drive another spike into Franklin's coffin. Anyway, you know them arrows is headed with new horseshoe nails. Well, whilst me and Doc was over thar yesterday, Doc here opened up a swellin' on Franklin's finger and took therefrom a shiny sliver which Doc says is frum a horse shoe nail!"

Jennison's powers of persuasion stood the test, for at two o'clock he arrived with Prince at the place of rendezvous. As a near rear guard came four of the dour cattlemen's riders. A

moon just coquetting with the western rim of the valley gave enough light to mark the presence of other horsemen. Here were all of Jennison's comrades, Aidlow and two men, Wingate with three of his. In view of Jennison's excluding ultimatum delivered just a few hours before, an explosion on the part of the little man seemed the immediate order of business. But there was no explosion. Rather, Prince rode over to where Aidlow and Wingate sat their horses side by side and held out his hand to each in turn.

"I'm the biggest fool in the valley," he stated the personal condemnation without qualifications.

"NOPE," Wingate disagreed. "We three are. And it took a stranger less than forty-eight hours to prove it to us."

"But WHAT a stranger!" Aidlow declared. "Even so, I'm sorry for Franklin."

"So am I," Prince admitted. "Still, what can we do?"

"Nothing, but go through with it," Wingate said grimly.

Jennison motioned them to gather in a close circle.

"You men know the whole tale to date," he began, "and how I figgered it so. If you'll foller up the lead I've prospected this fur, you'll find the mother lode of truth. As fur us, we'll step out right now."

They considered it silently for some moments, then Prince spoke their common judgment.

"Mr. Jennison," he said earnestly, "I and my two neighbors here owe you a world of thanks. We'd gone mad, mad as the dogs that ran over our ranges. You've shown us the truth and we recognize it. But we wish you'd see this bitter thing through, as our leader."

"If you don't, Mr. Jennison," Aidlow added, "we'll probably bungle it inside the next fifteen minutes."

"All right," Jennison conceded. "Still and but, as I've already done told you, thar's comin' a p'int where you three have gotta make the final decision."

With Jennison in the advance, the horsemen moved silently forward. A quarter of a mile and he called a halt. Here they dismounted, the horses were separated into their own home groups to avoid commotion and a man was detailed to watch each contingent. This done and a few crisp orders issued, Jennison again led the men forward. And very silently, for surprise was the essence of the venture.

It was hard upon the dawn when they next halted. Franklin's house and barns and corrals loomed black against a blacker background of distant mountains and close pressing cliffs. By previous agreement, Jennison with the three ranch owners remained before the house, while the others skirted the corral. As they melted into the shadows, Jennison and the three edged their way forward.

Stealthily they wormed their way through the front gate and in time were crouched beside the front porch. In the deep silence Jennison heard very distinctly the ticking of his watch. And here they remained while pale dawn wrought its magic in silver and pearly gray.

And then something intruded in amazing fashion that was not in the line of expectations. Suddenly the front door opened violently, old man Franklin leaped out upon the porch facing the front gate and flinging up his arms screamed wildly.

"Prince, Aidlow, Wingate, go back! You're walking into a trap."

INSTANTLY two men hidden behind a rick of wood a dozen feet from the kitchen straightened up, revolvers flaming and Franklin pitched from the porch, dead before he struck the ground. And as he toppled, from the men hidden behind the corral there came a deluge of lead. The murder of Franklin was avenged within less time than the recording. Things happened like the racing elements of a dream.

While Jennison paused with his hand pressed above Franklin's heart, his three companions had joined their men pounding out from behind the corral all converging upon the wood pile. Two men, sons of the slain Franklin, were yanked to their feet, while the mother and wife shrieked and beat her breast in a frenzy of hopeless wailing. Jennison joined the group, glancing briefly at the sullen prisoners, looked with pity at the agonizing woman, marked without condemnation the faces of the dead assassins.

"Welladay," he remarked, "life's a damned funny thing. Here's Cantrell and Robin Hood, buried neck deep in a cave-in of their plans that looked mighty promisin' five minutes ago. I wish mightily that Mr. Franklin, who of course all along knowed what was goin' on but fought ag'in it all he could, had stayed inside about another minute. He ain't had nothin' to do with it at all and that splinter of iron he got into his finger was per a accident." He turned to the three cowmen.

"You've gotta figger out what you're goin' to do with these three," he reminded them. "Me and my pards is trailin' over for the spot where I seen Robin Hood here leadin' that dog. After that we'll ride down to your place, Mr. Aidlow, for breakfast." He took a couple of steps and turned about, "I ain't tryin' to influence you men none," he said apologetically, "but this woman and her not over-smart boys has had strong things to feed their hate on."

A hundred yards from the house he took up the tale again.

"If Cantrell and them others had wiped out the three leaders like they figgered and brung in the Injuns' help they could a got, they'd jest about have owned this here fur a while, anyway.

"Cantrell figgered it so from my talk as I guessed he would, and laid his plans accordin'. Didn't tumble that I was ladlin' out jest foolishness last evening at Aidlow's. Don't believe that he even guessed that I knowed he shot that arrow at me, neither, and me with a sample of his shirt tail in my pocket all the time. And Robin Hood on account of his ruckus with Prince put in with Cantrell and the Missus and her two boys also."

"How do you come at that footrace you stopped between Hood and his own mad dog?" Milt Scougal asked.

"I reckon it by guess," Jennison said quaintly. After a moment he expanded the thought. "S'pose Hood had choked the dog senseless like I figger he always done. All right then. He dropped the dog down onto the ground and slipped off his rope. S'pose then for reasons we ain't ever knowin' in this life, his hoss bolted, stepped into a hole or something and shot Mr. Hood over the saddle horn like a skyrocket. Mr. Hood loses his pistol in that swift flight, his holster was empty you'll remember. He hits on his head and was out as complete as the dog. Well then s'pose he comes to and finds the dog has also. Bein' bad shook and fuddled from his tumble and findin' himself minus both hoss and gun, 'specially with a mad dog movin' onto his works, Hood done the human thing, run."

BAT, my friend," Levitt smiled, "what a rhetor you would have made in the days of ancient Rome."

"She's mebby no compliment, Doc," Jennison grinned. "Still and but I bet you're right."

They crossed Halleluiah Creek near the stop they had rescued Robin Hood and followed up the way that he and the dog had come. Here the creek swung back sharply toward Franklin's house. Presently Jennison stopped and pointed upward. High above them towered a rocky terrace, inaccessible from where they sat their horses.

"Thar's where I seen Hood and the dog which I thought was another man," he announced. "She's plain writ thar's a path up sommers but not here apparent. Let's look-see."

An hour's search revealed the path and a tough scramble landed them in

time on the terrace near the stop where Jennison through the telescope had glimpsed Hood. Just around the corner where man and dog had disappeared they found the end of their mystery. A rude leanto where someone had camped roughly and two pens, made of saplings, high and tight. And only one dog, a battered, shrinking derelict that crouched and feared but did not even whine.

"The final one," so Jennison appraised him. "Used up all the others. They kept the last bit dog in the little pen and the others in the big one. Could keep spacin' their madness out that way. In all my ramblin's this is the damnedest scheme I ever stubbed my toe onto." He looked hopefully at the trembling dog, then sadly shook his head.

"He's been bit," and he pointed to the all too evident signs. "Pore chap. Thar's only one thing to do and I sure hate to do it."

Five minutes later they stood again upon that lofty terrace of rock and looked out across the valley. Beautiful and serene it lay there under the caress of the rising sun.

"The Valley Where God Walks," Jennison mused reverently. "Well, whatever Injun give it that name sure tossed a ringer."

That was a real fight in the badlands cabin. The way Coteau tells it: "I picked up the chair in the pitch dark and started lamming the Rough Bunch with it. When I felt the chair hit someone I'd ask, 'Partner is that you?' And if he didn't say 'Yes,' I'd hit him again."

ROUGH ON THE ROUGH BUNCH

By Coteau Gene

I SHORE like my Pard Mel a heap—he's one grande hombre, by golly. He'll not only do to take along—HE'S GOOD ENOUGH TO GO ALONG WITH. You don't know Mel? Well, you just sit tight and I'll tell you what sort of a ranny he is.

Everybody on this range—everybody that's any good—likes Mel. The Barrel Butte range is a pretty big range at that. But the Rough Bunch that used to hang around Hard Rock—but wait until I get my loop shook out a bit.

Say, it's funny, come to think of it, that none of us ever did know Mel by any other name. Why—that's funny too—I don't even know just when he drifted in here or where from, and him and me has been pards, I'see, ever since I went over to the Dutch Pipe to rep for the Buck Saw calf roundup afore last.

Mel was signed on with the Pipe but didn't seem to have no pard, and, of course, I'm alone. We just naturally teamed up. He's a big, good-looking buckaroo, not one of them dude-purty sort as gals is supposed to be locoed over. He's anyhow six feet, and purty hefty for a cowhand. Kinda hard to pick a string for him. Some cayuse outfits wouldn't sign him, I reckon.

Mebbe his being hefty is howcome he signed on with a Barrel Butte outfit. We've got a big range stocked with big hosses, big cows and big men. What's that? "Big gals?" Quit yore kiddin'—this ain't Hollywood. Any sort of a gal would start a stampede out here. We don't even dast talk about gals—I'm tellin' you about Mel.

Mel's eyes is blue and have little wrinkles around 'em as comed from his smilin' with 'em most all the time. He ain't no hard hombre, nairy a mean line on his map. Short, kinda palomino-colored hair, some crinkly. Mel never HE-HAWS. Nope, he jes' chuckles a lot down deep, and keeps smilin' even when hell's so hot it's poppin' off.

I soon found out as Mel ain't no fussy hustler—he takes things sorta easy like and—well, somehow he seems to be lucky. Never busts no cinchas, but always gits a job done right. I reckon he's got what some folks call "knack."

I didn't run onta Mel again ontil come next beef cut. The Dutch Pipe sent him over to rep for 'em on our Bucksaw's point wagon outfit. I liked him a lot more, and when it come spring I put in to rep at the Pipe again. The Old Man said, "O.K." and I shore was tickled pink.

IT'S while Mel and me is combin', the second day out, that we seen where a bunch of cows had drifted off and through a break in the north drift fence. The tracks is two or three days old, and we don't see nawthin' of the strays, even from the top of a butte. Mel, he 'lows we better go back to the wagon and talk to Dutch Mike hisself.

Mel, he told Mike about the strays, and after Mike had smoked out his pipe good, he asked me if I'd mind going with Mel to bring in them strays. I said I didn't mind 'cause reppin' with the Dutch Pipe spread was more of a custom than a necessity. Nobody had to check on the brands to see as a calf got the right iron on it.

We're packin' one horse with light bedrolls and grub for the two of us and have already caught up fresh mounts when Dutch come over and says, "Poys, bedder as you takes refolfers."

Shucks, I hadn't loaded down with shootin'-irons to go rep at the Dutch Pipe, and Mel, he'd left his back at the Pipe's H.Q. camp. So I says, "What the deuce does we need of shootin'-irons, Mike? We got, mebbe, a lot of fast ridin' to do and every pound of weight will just hold us back that much."

"You never can tell," said Mike. "Meppe tem cows be rustled alretty yet?" I ain't no Dutchman, so I can't repeat what Mike said just right, but his lingo was about half Dutch, half English, and two-thirds just American cow talk.

But Mel and me hadn't seen no horse tracks along with that bunch of stray cow tracks, so we don't go none on Mike's tum-tum about rustlers. Shore we'd been hearing of rustling going on way up over the Coteau range, but that's over a hundred miles from Barrel Butte range and nobody had been bothered down our way for, oh three or four years. Anyhow Mike never does urge a suggestion he makes. He just makes one mebbe, and leaves it go at that, but if he does make one and you don't take it and you fall down—it's just too bad. Mike don't tell you, "I told you so." Hell no! He just hands a feller his time.

So Mel and me ride off onheeled and taking our own chances, Mel, anyhow. 'Course I wasn't signed on with the Pipe, but same time when a tophand is reppin' he don't like it to get out he fell down on his job. He's kinda got to hold up the reputation of his brand, yuh know, or when he gets back the outfit will ride him plenty. You see, most regular hands like to go rep. It's some like going on a vacation or a visit. You're suppose to work but—well, anyhow, it's a change.

Mel and me ain't so long getting back to the break in the drift fence, and now we jog along on the trail of the strays. I soon noticed the strays don't seem to have stopped to graze any and so I says to Mel, "It shore seems like them cows has been driv, but danged if I can find any horse tracks. So how could them be driv?"

MEL'S been reading sign too, but he only can shake his head. He can't figger it out either. We've been on the trail mebbe five miles, and are way past the butte we tried lookin' from when all of a chunk we come onto where another bunch of cows has joined in with them we're follering. And now there's tracks of, say, a hundred head, and they all keep right on going north. I'd say at a pretty fast clip. Mebbe as fast as three miles an hour, and with nobody driving 'em at that!

"Mel," I says, "there ain't been no bad thunder storm recent, has there? One as would make cows bunch and hightail along thisaway?" I didn't know for shore, because I'd come over from the Bucksaw.

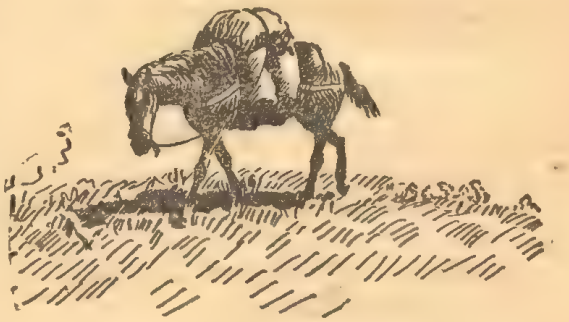
Mel says, "We ain't had a shower since I don't know when. Them tracks ain't more'n two days old, and they ain't mud tracks. They're grass 'n dust tracks. And the hell of it is, just like you says—there ain't no horse tracks, but them cows has been driftin' plenty fast. I'd say, from the length of the strides, mebbe four miles an hour, and keepin' it up. I call that a circumstance!"

Well, we follered them tracks at a jog for three hours more and then found where they'd turned into a sink and had bedded down for a night. Close herded, seemed like, but what by, danged if we could tell. We can't find no camp where any punchers had made a fire or rolled in their beddin'. We circled for a mile around, and way off to the west side of the sink come on some horse tracks. Just one horse and it was big hoof tracks, and them just piddlin' along. We follered them for a mile and found a old blind stud horse bedded down in some pussy-willers in a wet corner of the sink. We didn't even stop to wake the old boy up.

We'd seen plain where the cows had started north again after beddin', but what we wanted to find was horse tracks. We were fed up on cow tracks. Well, we just had to go on with the cow tracks, and it got too dark before we found where they bedded next time, so we dry-camps for the night.

Airly next mornin' we're on the trail again and it's some plainer, but not much. About noon we finds where the tracks crossed the railroad tracks, all well bunched. That's damn funny, we thinks, because if they ain't driv and close-herded, cows will drift up and down a right-of-way quite some piece before they will all go across. But our cows crossed in a narrow trail and went right on north like Santa Claus was a callin' 'em and offerin' 'em bran slop. By dark, we're well into the Coteaus. We had to camp again, there ain't no use lookin' for cows among the coteaus at night, and not no hell of a lot of use lookin' for them there in the daytime unless you're on a fresh trail.

Coteaus is just grass covered hills, you know, and they all look alike. You can start windin' around 'em and up coulees and down coulees and into pockets and up draws and down draws until you don't know where you are at, and nobody else does either.



NEXT day, we takes up the trail again and it keeps windin' around, with the cows more spread out and doing some grazin'. Still the biggest critter we've seen is a jackrabbit. Afore sundown it's got durned hard to tell which way them cows went. Their tracks is scattered over and around mebbe half a dozen coteaus, coulees and draws, and it's tough to tell if they are coming or going. Only we signs out they're workin' more north all the time, so we just

keeps driftin' kinda north-like and watchin' to see we don't run clear out of cow track range.

Over dough-gawd that evenin', I asked Mel if he knew the coteaus further north. I'd never crossed so far up, and I'm getting fed up on coteaus and more coteaus and most coteaus. Mel just said, "I was up that way once, long time ago. There's lakes up beyant, and some big meaders and there's Injuns and other varmints worse'n Injuns."

"What other varmints is worse'n Injuns?" I asks.

Mel rolls a pill, and I can see for once he ain't smiling. He says, "Feller, if yo' was wanted BAD down states, and didn't want to accept any invitations to call and be hung, what'd you do?"

I thought about it a while and I said, "Mebbe I'd lose pappa's boy right here in these coteaus."

Mel said, "I've rid with dumber fellers'n you."

When we'd fried our sow bosom next mornin' I said, "Mel, I think I'll go back, I don't like coteaus any too well, especially without a gun."

Mel just smiled and said, "O.K.", and I thought he meant he was goin' back with me, but when I started south he started north, and me leadin' the pack horse at that.

"I thought we was goin' out?" I said.

He smiled and said, "No, we ain't goin' out, just you."

I said, "Like hell I'm goin' out alone. But I think we ought to go back and get all the roundup outfit, fetch our hardware up here and do a war act with them—them 'varmints' you say may be further on up a piece."

Mel said, "We can't be more'n a few hours behint Mike's cows, if they be Mike's cows. If we go back, it will take a week to get the outfit up here, and them cows might be in St. Paul or Omaha by that time. There's another railroad up yander and another state and, for that matter, it ain't beyond drivin' distance to another country."

I says, "Suppose we do come on them cows, what good will it do us? Anybody as can draw cows way up here on a string or something is too damn deep for me."

Mel smiled and said, "Them cows didn't have no strings tied to 'em. They was drive up here." I can't figger that out none, but I follers Mel and he heads for a dunce-capped coteau. In about the middle of the forenoon we gets up it and can see a million acres of coteaus, but that's about all. We eats a snack up there and keep on lookin'. I hear Mel yip a mite and turned. I saw him pointing a trigger finger, and way off where he pointed I could see a flock of teal circling around. Finally they went down, out of sight.

LAKE," Mel said. "Mike's cows is over nigh it, I reckon. Take a good look at the lay of the land. We'll go on over to the lake after dark."

"After dark," I says, "we start riding around a coteau and keep on until we get dizzy and fall off."

Mel smiled, "Stars," he said.

"That's so," I said, "but s'pose we do spot a star off toward the lake, how we going to see it when we're down in a deep coulee? Time we get around a coteau to look for our star, all the stars will look alike, just like the coteaus look."

"Can't go around," Mel said. "Got to go up and over and down, in a straight line."

"Sounds easy," I said, "only there's straight up and down places a hundred feet high. I never did like to ride a bronc straight up or straight down. I like it slantin' a little."

"I'll go first," Mel said, "a rope around me, 'tother end to yore saddle horn. If my bronc starts down too damn fast I'll let him go, and you can back up your cayuse until I'm landed again."

"Fine!" I said, "only I'm afraid you weigh more'n me and my cayuse and my hull, and will pull us down too."

Mel smiled, then he picked up a big niggerhead, as was the size of a wash

tub, and handed it out to me. "You might put this in your vest pocket," he said, "to give you more weight."

Honest, he held that rock out like he was handin' me a watermelon, but the danged thing must have weighed as much as a yearling.

"Cripes!" I says, "you are shore one stout son-of-a-gun!"

Mel just smiled and gave the rock a toss and it went rolling down that coteau and never stopped short of a mile. That night, though, I had to hold Mel back once. His bronc went on and broke its neck. We got his hull and put it on the pack horse and cached the bedrolls and some of the grub. About one o'clock we saw a light in a log cabin in a little grove on the west shore of the lake. We hears cows pullin' grass all around us, but it was shore black on the ground. A feller could have bumped into his own shadow and never recognized it. The stars seemed ten miles high, and didn't give no light on the ground at all.

"Injun cabin," said Mel, "but I don't reckon any Injuns is livin' in it tonight."

WE TIED our broncs to some willers on the bank of the lake and walked on toward the cabin. When we got close, we heard a fiddle scrapin' and a mouth-harp wheezing. Somebody was playing "Devil's Dream." We looked in the four-pane winder and saw about a dozen men sittin' and layin' around in a biggish room. A pair was playin' them instruments, and a couple or three fellers were shuffling around in a dance. There was a big wooden keg on a box. Its head had been bashed in and there was a tin dipper hanging on a nail over it. While we looked, two fellers come to the keg and both reached for the dipper at the same time. Then they started cussin' each other, and in a second they were on the floor rolling, biting, gouging and bamming each other.

"Shucks," I whispered to Mel, "them fellers shore like to fight, just over who gets a drink of water first, and nobody crowdin' 'em at the trough."

"Water?" Mel whispered back. "That's hard cider spiked with alcohol."

"How do you know?" I asked. But Mel didn't say. I looked at each feller in the room and some faces seemed mighty familiar. Then the fellers fightin' on the floor rolled onto one other feller's feet and he kicked them and they got up and started at him. But when they saw who it was had kicked them they laid off. But I knew both them as had been fighting. Knew them by sight. I'd seen both hanging around Hard Rock. They were part of "The Rough Bunch" as hung around Hard Rock a lot. I wondered what they were doing way up here in the maze of the coteaus. I yanked at Mel's shirt, and he came back away from the window. I said:

"I wonder where at they keeps their horses? Let's spear around and nose out the layout here." Mel came along and we come onto a corral and a pole shed, and I went up to the corral, but it was so dark I couldn't see if there was any horses in it or not. I was leaning over the bars of the pole gate when I felt something cold and wet stuck onto my bare arm. I jumped back and must have yipped a mite. Anyhow Mel shushed me up, then came

alongside. He reched out and felt around and I heard him chuckle.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Steer," he said. "A big steer. And here's another. And here's another. They lick my hand."

"Shucks," I said, "they must be cows, if they're that tame."

"Steers," he said. "Them's the answer to how Mike's cows got up here. Run your hand down this one's back."

I felt along Mel's arm and onto the back of a tall critter, and felt saddle marks. Places where the hair had been worn off by the tree. I said, "Cripes! you mean Mike was rustled by an outfit what rid these steers?"

"Shore," Mel said. "I suspected it soon after we started on the trail. The Injuns up this way didn't have enough horses. They started breakin' cow critters to ride, a long time ago."

"That so?" I said. "But them fellers in the cabin ain't Injuns."

"No," Mel agreed. "Them's them varmints I mentioned."

"What you plan to do now?" I asked him. "Do you reckon we can wait until come daylight and then sneak a drive on Mike's cows afore the gang gets awake and onto us? Mebbe we could drive the cows faster with our horses than they could—naw! We couldn't begin to."

"That's right," Mel agreed. "We couldn't. But seems like the outfit is all there in the cabin. We can barge in there and knock their damn heads off."

Say, that was the craziest plan I ever heard in my life. Two of us bargin' into a den of varmints so damn ornery they fought each other just to see which took a drink first. I didn't like the plan and I told Mel so, plain.

"O.K.," he said, just like when I told him I was going back that morning. But when I started toward where we'd left the broncs he started toward the log cabin. Not hesitatin' any or not hurrying any, but just the same as he usually did things. I didn't dare holler at him, so I waited a bit and then follered the damn fool.

HE WALKED right on to the cabin, up to the door. He opened the door and walked right in. I could see into the open door, and I saw him step up to the feller with the fiddle. He grabbed the fiddle and used it to smash a big lamp. Then it was dark, and I had somehow got inside and like a damn fool had shut the door behind me and bolted it. There wasn't any other door, so I kept close to it so I could get out quick.

I couldn't see a thing, but I could hear plenty. I've never been to hell yet, but I imagine it might sound some like it did in that room. Once I went to a big circus and it come up a bad thunderstorm and the menagery went on the prod and—well, the noise in that dark room was even worse. These varmints could talk to you so you could understand them, some. But mostly it was bad cussing, grunts, groans, yips and yells. Also bumps and bangs. I didn't like it in there, but didn't get much time not to like it, because somebody got hold of my legs and then things were bad. I got hold of somebody's gullet and hung on all I could. I could hear the feller suckin' fer breath and he tried to pull my hands loose. So I kicked him in the back of the neck with a boot heel and he quit his danged clawin'.

I stayed close to the door. I wanted to get out of there, but I didn't like very well to go away and leave Mel. So I yelled, "Mel! Mel! Here's the door over this way."

Cripes! I heard fellers rushing at me, cussing and bumping and banging. Mel yelled, "Shut up, you jug-head!" So I did. I had to. Half a dozen men barged plumb at me, and if I hadn't moved a piece away from the door by then, they'd have barged into it and broke it down. But they barged head on into the log wall. Some must have just about broke their necks. They hit the wall so hard the logs trembled. They wanted out too.

Somehow I got untangled and slid across the dark room to the other side,

and then I yelled, "Mel! Mel! Where are you? Here's the door. Come! Let's get out of here, quick!"

BUT this time Mel didn't cuss me. But I could hear some fellers coming my way hell a-tootin'. So I got out of their way and let them buck the wall on that side. But now I'm lost too. I started to feel along the wall for the door, but I fell over a heavy chair. I got up with it and just went along in the pitch dark lamming up and down, right and left with that chair, and hoping I wouldn't hit Mel with it, and wishing I could find the door. Two or three times I felt the chair hit somebody and I'd yell:

"Mel, is that you?" And if he didn't say yes I'd hit him again. Once a feller said, "yes," but his face was so close I could smell hard cider and alcohol, so I hit him. But it wasn't him I hit. It was that keg. And the keg rolled off of the box and I got my boots full of booze, and the feller fell over the keg and then I kicked him and he lay still so I could step over him as I yelled, "Mel! Where are you?"

Then Mel said from someplace, "I'm over yere. Where is everybody else?"

I listen, but I couldn't hear anybody else. So we kept talking until we came together. Then we stood still and listened and we couldn't hear anything. I said:

"Let's find the door and get out. I don't like it in here."

Mel said, "Wait a minute. Hold that chair up while I strike a match. If you see anybody strike the chair on him."

Mel lit a match. Nobody came to be hit with the chair. Mel saw the lamp on the floor. Its chimney was gone, but he lit it anyhow and it smoked and made a big yellow light. It now looked like hell in that room. All of those varmints were down. Dead or knocked out plenty. It is bad fighting in the dark. You can't tell a friend from an enemy, and all you can do is just hook, strike and bite your way through. I reckon half of those varmints killed each other. Probably Mel got the other half. He was the stoutest feller I ever parded with.

Only four were alive. When it comed on light, we tied them four on the backs of their riding steers and drove them and Mike's cows back down to the Barrel Butte Range, but by that time the roundup was over, so I went on to the Bucksaw to report to The Old Man. But before I said so long to Mel I said:

"Mel, if you ever turned varmint and went back up the coteaus I wouldn't come up there to see you."

Mel he just smiled, then he said, sort of off-hand, "A feller might be a varmint once and get over it, but if he backslid I'm afraid he'd go plumb to hell."

"That would be bad!" I said. "That cabin up there was about as hot a place as I can stand."

Yeah, everybody likes Mel, that is, all the decent cowboys and ranch people of the Barrel Butte Range do. And, after that trip him and me made up north, we didn't see "The Rough Bunch" around Hard Rock no more. So I reckon everybody likes Mel now.

THE SAGE STOMPER

By James P. Olsen

I

THOSE HARDY ones wise to the trouble trails, moved out of Wade Corson's way. Like a high-power bullet, his was the type that went directly into things, letting no low winds of adversity deflect his course.

A dust-covered, tough figure, he rode into Bull Mound from the north, and reined up at the Antlers Saloon. He stretched, flexed his ungloved right hand, and with that same hand, adjusted the gun that rode low on his hip.

Easily, then, he went into the saloon. Not mean looking, and not the gunman-killer type, he yet gave an impression. Drink, new range, a job or a man—whatever it was he came in search of, that was just what Wade Corson would get!

His eyes cool, appraising, swiftly surveyed the small interior of the saloon. Weary miles and hard days and danger lay behind him, and here, at last, he had caught up with one he sought. Yet, since the Zacatecas Kid had his back turned to the door, Wade Corson saw no reason why he shouldn't have a drink before he made a play.

The bartender pushed bottle and glass forward at his low, drawled order. He opened his mouth to inquire as to health, and observe the other usual amenities. He cleared his throat, nod-

Wade Glayson was one woodpecker that took his trees as they came, and there were plenty of blockheads in and around Bull Mound that needed a little drilling.

ded, wondered if Corson was laughing behind that quizzical mask, or telling him to mind his own damned business and not to bother with trivial things. The bartender, being no shorthorn, kept closed.

A faint amused grin with something derisively satanic to it curved under Corson's lip. He drank, looking to the rear, where the swart half-breed, Zacatecas Kid, leaned on the bar.

Swiftly, as though seeking a companion of the Kid—who had been a kid too many years ago—Corson's level glance flicked the room. Alone at a corner table, engaged in looking Corson over in detail, sat a dish-faced man with dark hair stringing in his eyes, dark complexion, and the sullen set of his mouth showing his mood too, to be dark.

Corson shrugged slightly, stepped out and went down the bar.

He touched the man door-side of the 'breed on the arm. The man jerked his head angrily, blinked, and when Corson's lips drew down and he thumbed the man away, that hombre decided he hadn't wanted to stand there anyhow.

Corson as though he had just come in, tapped on the bar. "Ol' Crow," he

said pleasantly. "But don't run none of yo' border buzzard in on me."

The Zacatecas Kid jerked, he laid both palms flat on the bar and turned until he faced the crinkly mirror on the back bar. His breath sucked noisily down his throat—a sound of surprise, not of fear. Corson grinned bleakly into the glass, Zacatecas snarled at it. They did not look at each other, each felt coming fireworks if he moved too much.

"THE Panhandle, now," Corson suggested. "Didn't you leave some friends up there?"

"I left no friends," The Kid snarled.

"You might not know it, Kid, but you sure's hell did. An' it took a two-bit, leather-poundin' cowprod to see they stayed a while. Damn you, you greasy Chino, you savvy that?"

"Maybe—I—do. If so—what?"

"Mebbe you'd like to start back now? Come on."

"You start!" Kid croaked. He leaped backward from the bar, bent one knee and his gun was coming clear.

There was no magic in the gun pull Corson performed. He just went after his gun with one hand, and with the other, after the Kid. He rushed him as he drew, snapped a doubled fist to Kid's moving arm, disturbed the rapid smoothness of the draw and by that time had his own pistol in the free.

He shoved it against the Zacatecas Kid's chest. The first muffled blast, and the Kid rocked back. The second shot sent him heavily to the floor. He heaved, flopped, flung out a leg that upset a table and then was quiet. In that quiet way that only a dead man can achieve, he would remain so forevermore.

"Huddem!" the bartender croaked. "He almost got you. Was he a old enemy of yours?"

"He didn't damn near got me," Corson mimicked, not ceasing his staring down at the flattened figure of Zacatecas Kid. "An' he was, sort of, an ol' enemy of mine. Of a lot of men, here, there an' yonderly . . . What name did he go under around here?"

"He come in a week ago, and said he was a mule buyer and his name was Torreon."

"Torro—bull," Corson grunted. "Whoever has to mop him up will have the pleasure of knowin' they're wipin' over that border-hopper, raider an' killer, the Zacatecas Kid."

"The hell! I heard of him. Run with some big bunch somewhere. Well, life's like that. Here today, tomorrow wrestling with the worms to see who gets most space. Worms—" the barkeep sighed— "seem to generally win said argument."

He grinned, Corson grinned dutifully, the barkeep set out a drink. As he poured a stiff one, he looked from under his brows. The dark one of the corner table was now standing at his side.

"You seem to know your bad ones, stranger. And damned if you don't know how to go after them. Keep driving in on them, mess up their draw, and you won't have to be so fast."

Corson appraised him coldly. "Did I say my draw wasn't fast?" he demanded truculently.

"Don't be highty," the other growled, and Corson knew that here was a dangerous man to have for an enemy. "An' mebbe," he told himself, "he'd be worse as a friend."

"Officer?" the dark man inquired.

"Did I say?"

"No. But your clothes, so dusty, say not. The law usually ain't in such a hurry."

"You know how to read a brand, don't you? An' what does that all add up to? Like addin'? One an' one an' one make three. But they don't. Take the Kid, an' me, an' one bullet. Adds to three, but only leaves me—an' more bullets."

"That's so," the other agreed. "And if bullets are your business, come on outside. I got a proposition you might like to hear."

"An' if I don't like it? You look handy to me. An' sort of mean. Can't

you cut yo' own caballo out of the dark cavvy?"

"Plenty!" the other snapped. "But this is a cavvy I can't run into the corral myself."

Corson half closed one eye, finished his drink, took a look at the dead man and said: "If I don't like 'er, I don't have to ride. Let's go outside."

HE FOLLOWED the dark man down the street to the livery corral and they leaned, facing each other warily, against the poles.

"In the first place," the dark one said, "are you or ain't you a hired killer? Or was it just a feud in there?"

"Let's don't be so doggone brash an' to the point," Corson complained. "Me, when I see a patch of prickly pear, I sorta edge around it. Now, we'll say that was sort of feud in there, an' we won't say I'm a hired killer. Oh, hellush sakes, no! We'll say I'm paid to use my gun."

"If you think that's funny, it suits me. But I guess we savvy each other. First place, I'm Lock Bunner."

"A sort of orphan lamb, huh?"

"Bunner, not bummer. Dammit, I'm sick of you already. Don't buck your silly horse at me. I'm Lock Bunner, foreman of M Bar X, southwest of here."

Wade Corson started to exclaim something or other, and managed to sit his tail on it. He nodded, but his eyes narrowed as he bent his head and rolled a cigarette. A while ago, he thought this might lead to information. Now, his interest went much deeper.

"There's been a slough of rustling on this range, the past year," Bunner growled. "And two or three men never got over it. Riders, not rustlers, they were. Well, old Pete Miles, who owns the spread, hired himself a gunman a month ago. He's fooling old Pete. That gunnie ain't no good, and trouble will come of him. Pete, he's stiff-necked and won't listen to me. But I work for the interest of M Bar X. I'll pay a hundred out of pocket to see that gun-chuck killed, and killed quick."

"Sounds reasonable," Corson admitted. "An' what's this gun-hand's name?"

"Cisco Yarp," Lock Bunner revealed. Corson choked and coughed.

Bunner was right. Cisco Yarp was certainly no good. More than that, he was— Well, Wade Corson had come down here to find two men. One lay dead in the Antlers Saloon. The other one was Cisco Yarp!

And Corson had the feeling that Bunner really didn't know Yarp was bad. He figured Bunner wanted Pete Mile's gunman out for a reason of his own.

"You want the job?" Bunner demanded. "If so, I'll have a name."

"Well—" Corson thought hastily and decided to use his own— "the brand is Corson. Common enough where I come from. They was Uncle Zelphineas Corson, an' Cousin Chittum Corson, an'——"

"Oh, to hell with the pack of them! You take the job, kill Cisco Yarp and leave, not letting Pete Miles know my side in it?"

Corson had a strange lift to his voice when he replied:

"I'm yo' peckerwood, Bunner. Bring on a chunk of wood!"

II

IN THE crimson splashing of evening sky, distant mountains loomed dark and forbidding. Beyond those mountains lay the Rio Grande, and along the Rio Grande, trouble, death, most anything might be.

The last upsplashed cerise and purple faded slowly as Wade Corson and Lock Bunner came down a slope, picked across an arroyo and skirted a small mesquite flat. On the levels ahead of them, points of light commenced to wink.

"How you feeling?" Bunner gruffly inquired.

"How should I feel?" Corson came back.

"How the hell should I know? Cor-

son, I hope you do this thing quick, and take the trail. You and me wouldn't hitch at all, and don't get the idea that I would make it easy for you."

"I got an' idea," Corson said thinly, "this thing will be quick." He didn't see it proper that he should tell Bunner a fight would, ten-to-one, ensue the minute Cisco Yarp set eyes on him. He went on, in the same vaguely-meaning vein:

"You don't like me, because I don't try to be snappin' an' growlin' all the time. Mebbe a li'l rusty-cuttin' is good for us all—an' a grin can cover things as much as a scowl. Next, I never said I wanted to hitch with you, because I guess we ain't of a kind. An' on the other hand if I liked it down in here, I'd stay, no matter how easy or not you'd make it for me."

"You trying to start something? To back out?"

"Does it look like it? Nope. I'm just puttin' you right, is all."

They rode into the ranch yards and to the stable. Bunner turned his horse over to a hostler, Corson insisted on caring for his own mount and gear. As he observed mentally: A gun will shoot a man down, but it takes a good horse to get you away from his friends.

They went to the bunkhouse and Bunner looked in. Cisco Yarp wasn't there. A freckled-face young rider Bunner gruffly addressed as Bud Cole left off blowing cougarish sounds out of a mouth harp made off-key by tobacco flakes lodged in it.

"Yarp?" Oh, he rode off antigogglin', sorta, towards Bull Mound, while after you left. Said he wasn't certain all the rustlin' was towards the river an' the mountains, anyhow. He ain't come back."

Bunner walked back out to where Corson waited. "Remember," he warned. "I hired you because we need another hand. I don't know about nothing, and ain't got no idea about anything. You pick a fight with Yarp, and leave me in the clear."

"'Sta bueno." Curtly. "Ain't any 'special place you'd like me to shoot him, is they? Like, say, startin' at the big toe an' sorta workin' up to the job, as you might say. Of course, I bet this Yarp is a slow sorta lead slammer an'——"

"And to hell with you," Bunner snarled. "He ain't slow, but you say you are faster than you showed. Anyhow, do him like you done that 'breed. But leave off your funny stuff."

"You must get a helluva lot of pleasure out of life," Corson observed.

"Never mind. My pleasure's what I make it, and what I make it ain't no business of yours. Yarp ain't here now. There's the pan. Let's roll in for chuck."

THERE were six men in the cookshack besides Corson and the foreman. Four of them Corson dismissed with a nod. He reckoned there would be three or four out on the range, and had it about right. The second of the six interested Wade Corson much more.

There was the young rider, Bud Cole. He had a wild, cheerful way about him and matched grins with Corson. The other was a grizzled, lank old longhorn with a pair of probing, chill eyes. Corson bet with himself his name would be Tex. Corson won. The oldster's name was Tex Guymon.

He looked straight and hard at Corson and, sparing with his words, clipped out, "I seen you or somebody like you before. A long time back."

"It's the 'lasses an' buzzard meat he eats, makes him think such things," Bud Cole assured Corson cheerfully.

"I thought they'd done took them reward notices down," Corson sighed.

Old Tex grunted and went on with his eating.

The meal finished, Corson pushed back, rolled and lit a cigarette and stuck it to his underlip. He stood up. A quick, hard thrust of nerves at his stomach, a never-failing sign with him, caused him to turn toward the door. He waited expectantly.

Cisco Yarp, swaggering, sneering, appeared in the light and stepped on inside. He brought a foot down in midstride, the sound of his boot heel coming sharp and loud. His head jerked forward and his mouth opened.

"Hi, Cisco," Corson greeted, a harshness in his voice that belied the words. "Long time no see. Long time look for see. Think long time no more see again."

Cisco Yarp settled his feet firmly on the floor. "I reckon," he snarled, "we'd best come to a showdown right now."

TEX GUYMON and Bud Cole, Corson noted in a swift glance, remained in their seats. They leaned easily so they might drop to the floor—but still remained where they could see the gun show they knew was coming on. The other punchers were slowly sliding down between the table and the benches along the side.

Lock Bunner moved toward the door, and old Tex followed him with his eyes. To Tex, Bunner didn't look enough surprised. Tex put a bit of meat in his mouth and laid his fork soundlessly on his plate.

"A showdown she is, Cisco," Corson tersely agreed. "First, I want to tell you that Rine Salters, Abe Parker, an' Duke Tait are all in the calaboose up north. All headed for the pen. You did not know that, else you wouldn't come down here so soon, startin' to lay plans for another beef steal."

Cisco Yarp had it on his lips to call Corson a liar. But a look at Wade Corson, and he knew that it wasn't a lie. The color drained slowly from Yarp's face and a thin, desperate, mean look was concentrated thereon.

"I got them, Yarp. Yeah, me, the two-bit, forty-an'-found cowhand you thought you'd shot down when you raided the herd. I got them, an' turned them over to the law.

"Yarp, was you into Bull Mound this afternoon?"

"No, damn you. I——"

"Reckon the Zacatecas Kid got in ahead of time. He was down here makin' connections about gettin' wet stuff across the river, wasn't he?"

Cisco didn't answer. His nostrils quivered and breath came through them audibly.

"No need to rush off," Corson mocked. "The Kid'll wait there for you. He'll wait until doomsday, I guess. I shot hell out of the sheepherder's son. He wouldn't go back an' let a judge throw the whole book at him. I'm givin' you the same choice as he got."

"And I'll give you a answer!" Yarp snarled.

The smack of his palm was like the sharp crack of a tiny pistol. Fast. Terribly fast. His gun was half drawn before Wade Corson's right paw hit his own pistol grips. Cisco Yarp threw all his skill, all his trained nervousness into his draw. Wade Corson did not.

He leaped suddenly, swinging his left fist. Yarp jerked back his head to avoid the blow, messed up his gun hauling, felt his hand smacked out of line. The thrust of Corson's gun muzzle sent a stab of pain into his stomach.

Cursing, he swung to one side, getting his own pistol up again. Wade Corson's big gun, for the second time that day, gave out two cloth-and-flesh-muffled roars.

Yarp spun, tripped on his own feet, went against the table and fell back. Corson's impression was of old Tex, snatching up his cup so the coffee would not spill. Odd what certain men will do at certain times.

Corson's eyes, then, were for Lock Bunner. Cisco Yarp was sprawled on his face half under the table. No need to eye him. He was done. But Bunner, the dark look more apparent now, had let his hand fall to his gun. He glowered at Corson, and a strong enmity, a threat ran between them, almost a visible thing. Bunner, Corson knew, had been ready to kill him, with Yarp as excuse. Lock Bunner didn't want manhunters around.

"Thanks, Bunner," Corson jeered. "Take yo' hand off yo' iron. Nice of you to think of me, but I don't need no help!"

They continued to eye each other in that chill, portentous way. Snarling, Bunner let his hand fall to his side.

III

PETE MILES stood just inside the doorway, peering down over the steel rims of his spectacles. He wrinkled his nose and sniffed the burnt powder tainting the air, eyed the body of Cisco Yarp and turned on Lock Bunner.

"Who the whangdoodlin' hell had the guts to jump Yarp?" he demanded. "Why? An' who was tricky enough to down him?"

Bunner scowled at Wade Corson. "I picked up this new hand in Bull Mound today," he explained. "When Yarp come in, this salty jasper jumped him."

"Wait a minute," Tex Guymon cut in. "Shore, Corson—Holy, howlin' hell! Shore, I recollects thet name. Bill Corson. He was the fire-eater thet was on thet drive we made from the Nations to Montana, up on the Missouri. 'Member him, Pete? An' this fightin' hairpin here, he looks like Bill Corson an' he fights like him!"

Pete Miles softened. He rubbed the top of his bald pate and came nearer, squinting at Wade Corson. Forgotten, for the moment, was the cause at hand, as it ever was when, to these old-timers, remembrances out of a beloved, wild past cropped up.

"Bill Corson any kin to you, hombre?" His demand was eager.

"More than just shirttail kin," Wade Corson admitted. "He was my dad. He died six years back. Died with a mortgage in one paw an' too much dose of drouth an' hoof an' mouth disease in the other. Li'l cows an' burnt range all went. But I've heard him tell, many's the time, about that drive into the upper Missouri. He—anyhow, I aimed to look you up, when my job here was done."

"We'll hear about the job, an' then we'll swap some yarns," Pete Miles said.

"Well, I was sorta strawboss an' cowhand combined, on a big outfit beyond the Canadian, beyond Plemons, in the Panhandle. A bunch of rustlin' started, an' the outfit hired gunhands to look to it. Hell of it, they was part of the rustlin' gang. They got away with a big market herd, an' when some of us, thinkin' things wasn't just right, got on their tails, they 'bushed us.

"Killed two of the best boys ever pounded leather, an' left me for dead. When I got around, I owed that bunch plenty. One for me an' the two they'd kilt, the other, runnin' off beef under my charge. So I sets out after them, an' the sheriff eggs me on. I got three, an' they'll do life, anyhow. A marshal in Dalhart got another one, an' another was killed in a gunbattle in Bartlesville.

"Two was still on the prod, not knowin' about the bunch up north bein' in the juzgado. I been trailin' them. They was fixin' the same stunt here. Zacatecas Kid, him I killed in Bull Mound today, would fix to get cattle across the border, Cisco Yarp would come in as a gunnie for a troubled outfit. Here the trouble was ready made for them. Then, they'd send for the rest of the outfit.

"So—" Corson shrugged.

"Then, they'd been two outfits stealin' me blind!" Pete swore. "An' to think I was sucked in by Yarp. Hell, he had a lot of credentials an' papers as a gunman an' stock detective."

"Forged, I reckon."

"Lucky for us both, mebbe, Bunner picked you up. But if you knew who owned this place, how come you hit it for a job in town?"

Wade Corson looked at Bunner, and grinned mockingly. "Why, I figgered it'd be a joke. An' I didn't think I'd find Yarp out here."

Lock Bunner relaxed, and he tried to

smile. Hate continued to burn in his eyes, and there was a measure of craft, of odd fear inscribed on his dark, dished face.

"Tex, come on. Corson, we got a lot to talk about. I got to hear about old Bill. Tex says you fight like him. Inherited it, I reckon. Bill, he never was fast—but huddem it, he sure was certain."

THEY went to the house and into a room that was Pete's alone. Bridles, a saddle, guns, quirts and spurs cluttered the place, and there was a cupboard and bottles, and a couple of stone jugs. Pete broke out a jug and filled tin cups. No glasses for this oldtimer.

Wade Corson told what there was to tell. And asked "How is it that Tex, here, ain't roddin' this shebang?"

Pete glared at Tex, and Tex bristled back. "Whangdoodlin' ol' polecat, he won't take over. Says he ain't goin' to have the responsibility, an' had druther be just a cowhand. Damn orneriness, you ast me."

"Nobody's askin' yuh!" Tex snarled. "Yuh ol' warthawg, I ain't never takin' over, havin' yuh blame me for ever'-thing."

Grinning, Corson put in to stop the battle, "How long you had Bunner?"

Pete tossed off his drink. "More'n two year. Good man, Lock. Gets the work done. Kinda sullen, onfriendly, but he's a'right. It ain't his fault M Bar X is losin' so much. But somethin' has got to be done. It ain't bein' done big at a time, Corson, just a regular peckin' away until it hurts like hell."

"Figger where the stuff is goin'?"

"Mebbe into the mountains an' down to the river. I dunno. But—say, Tex, recollect the time, on that drive, when Bill Corson went into that nester's yard to try buyin' some eggs. Hee-hee! He clumb a bobwire fence, an' a bull got after him an' choused him around a haystack.

"The damn nester come out an' started bellerin' 'Hey, stop chasin' my bull!' Bill, he hi-yups back at him. Bill wasn't but six-eight feet behind the bull by then. Well, he says, 'Chasin' your bull, hell! He's chasin' me. I'm jest outrunnin' him too much is all.'"

"An' the time," Tex put in, "when the cook said he'd make some bread custard if somebody would milk a cow. Well, we got a proddy ol' heifer outta the herd, an' we started. Two-three the boys got stomped plumb scand'-lous. Bill, he'd been hittin' a jug, an' was plumb bodacious. 'Lemme at thet ol' devil,' he says. He got kicked down twice, an' tromped some. But think thet ol' sage stomper would quit? Huh!

"It shore was funny. Bill gets him a lass rope, ropes thet damn ol' heifer to a wheel of the hoodlum wagin, crawls under the waggin an' milks her through the spokes of the wheel! It was the hind right wheel, I recollects, an'——"

"It was the left front wheel. I know, because I was——"

"Pete, I said it was the right hind wheel. Don't you tell me, when I know——"

"You loco paisano, it was the front wheel."

THEY had their noses about an inch apart and were glaring like gamecocks and trying to shout each other down when the door opened, a laughing, light voice cut through their squalling, and they both shut up and looked sheepish as could be.

That voice did things to Wade Corson. It made him sort of breathless, pulled at him inside and made him feel rather dizzy in his head.

"Wade Corson," Pete Miles said proudly, "this is my daughter, Gloria."

Wade turned and their eyes, in that moment, caught, held, and there was something between them that lasted but an instant, but would be forevermore. The girl laid a soft little hand into Corson's palm.

"Wade's the son of ol' Bill Corson you heard me tell about," Pete explained.

"Is he going to work for M Bar X?" the girl inquired, trying to be unconcerned.

"I'm goin' to try an' get him to straighten out our trouble," Pete avowed. "Seems like he's pretty good at it. How about it, Wade?"

Wade Corson looked down into deep, hazel eyes. "M-m-m-n. I don't know," he mumbled.

The girl's eyes twinkled and he thought she nodded ever so slightly. He thought of Bunner, and that meant trouble.

"I'm yo' peckerwood," he drawled. "Bring me on a tree."

IV

IN THE morning when the hands rode out, Bunner called Wade Corson into his office—a little place in which he lived, built just off the bunkhouse. There was a suave way about Bunner that fooled Corson not at all.

"Corson, you and me have got to understand each other," the foreman said. "Pete knew your paw, and he has put you on to clean up this trouble here. You lied to me, when you didn't tell me you were hunting men who'd killed your friends and shot you and stole beef in your charge. If you'd told me, we'd have gone at it differently."

Corson rolled a cigarette, in silence.

"Did you tell Pete Miles about my hiring you?"

"Nope. You said you done it for the good of the ranch—an' mebbe you did." He stared directly at Bunner and Bunner looked away.

"That's fine. Then you know I got the M Bar X at heart. You and me might not hitch. I'll let you alone, or help you all I can. On the other hand, you stay out of my affairs. That understood?"

"It's plain enough. Suppose I want a man to ride out with me?"

"You can have one."

"Then, if it's the same to you, I'll take Bud Cole today. He's over in the blacksmith shop now."

"'Sta bueno." Bunner agreed.

Bud Cole was more than willing to ride with Corson. They hit it off southwest, across rolling shortgrass range, cut by arroyos and studded with mesquite and prickly pear that finally gave up to stunted cedars as they brought the mountains up.

Corson got a bottle from his alforjas and passed it to Bud. "At least," he commented, smiling, "it'll keep yo' face off that wind-busted blow-harp for awhile."

"I play 'em when I am thunkin'," Bud informed him. "An' when I drinks good likker like this here, now, I thunk all the harder."

Corson leaned and snatched at the bottle, groaning. Bud backed his horse away, thumbing his nose gleefully. He drank a big one. "That sure cee-ments our lastin' friendship," he stated, handing the bottle back.

"Like hell." Corson eyed the bottle sourly. "Few more slugs like that, they ain't goin' to be no friendship."

They rode on, and in a semi-light vein, Corson asked: "Bud, if you was losin' cows, an' things like that, what would you say?"

"Well, just supposin', now. See that notch between the mountings, 'way up there ahead? That's Split Pass. Wild country beyond. An' on over, is the hiss-toh-rick Rio Grande. They's a town this side. Only, when the river shifts on a bar ten mile up, she is sometime the other side the line, in Mexico. Nobody cares much though. Town is called Dirty Feet. It sure does stunk, too. Y'know the kind."

"Any other way rustled stuff can be got over, besides this Split Pass?"

"Sure. If a feller ain't in a hurry an' don't give a damn, he can chouse thirty mile north, fifty mile west, an' go over. Or he can try pushing through the mountings just anywhere. But I doubt he'd have one head outta four time he wound up."

"It gets more simple, don't it, figgerin' a man wasn't like a hen, an' time meant somethin' to him?" Corson mused. "An' is it M Bar X range right up to the mountains?"

"Why, no, it ain't. They's a fella uses the name Hart Redding, got a couple starvation sections cuttin' us off from there. His stuff is on a sorta li'l bench just into the foothills, an' below the pass. He's got lottsa free range, an' welcome. Even a jackass rabbit couldn't chaw a livin' out of it."

"But he gets along?"

"Manages to spend some time in Dirty Feet. Spends dinero. He—look here, Corson, I like you. I figger you the pure quill an' a couple woolie yards wide. An' Tex likes you in his growlin' way. But don't expect me to go stirrin' up nothin' for Miss Gloria. Y'understand?"

"Nope, Bud, I don't. I wouldn't want you to stir her up nothin'."

BUD was thoughtful. "Here goes the tail with the hide, then," he said resignedly. "But if you so much as breathe a word, I'll blow my ol' mouth organ in your off ear the rest of your days.

"This Hart Redding, Corson, come down here about eighteen months ago. Seems to make a hit with Miss Gloria right off. An' anything that gal wants, it's all right with her maw an' paw. Her maw is in Paso now, visitin' some of her folks.

"Well, Hart Redding is sparkin' Miss Gloria now, an' she rides down here to his place an' brings him home-cooked grub an' rids up his shack for him. Any notions you got about Hart Redding, you thunk twice. If Miss Gloria likes him, you got to be careful where you step."

"What does Bunner think of Redding?" Corson spoke to keep from heeding the twinge of hurt, odd jealousy that surged in him.

"Bunner? Oh, he says Redding is just another poor fool. He put two men guardin' Split Pass. They was shot. Redding, he ain't man enough, I figger, to even 'bush a feller. So I dunno about him."

"Reckon I'll wait, before makin' the acquaintance of this Redding hombre," Corson decided. "Let's swing off to the south."

They rode in silence for perhaps a mile.

"Corson, you done off with two men yesterday. I ain't never shot a man. Seems to me you'd think of it. Yet it didn't seem to bother you at all."

"That wasn't killin'," Corson replied. "It was justice. An' both of them had their chance two ways—a chance to come back to the Panhandle an' face trial, or to shoot it out of me if they could. First man I ever shot, he didn't die. But damn near did. I was sick for a week. After that, I killed one man. He tried to shoot me in the back. I——"

He broke off, reining up and staring toward the mountains now off on their right. A rider was cutting out of the hills and coming toward them. Even at this distance they could tell how angry he must be. He had that angry manner of sitting his saddle as he came on.

"It's Tex," Bud muttered. "An' madder than a ol' wet hen."

"I thought Tex was supposed to take a look at a waterhole back the other way this mornin'?"

"Yeah? Oh, sure. But Tex, he don't pay much mind to what Bunner says. An' Bunner, he don't like Tex so very well."

Tex Guymon came on up. He pulled rein and sat glowering at them. Wade Corson chuckled under his breath and Bud reached for his harp.

"I see it's hot in them hills," Corson commented innocently. "So hot, you put holes in yo' sombrero so the li'l bitsy breezes can blow through."

REX snatched off the hat and poked fingers through two holes in the crown.

"Laugh an' grin, yuh young hyee-

nies!" he snapped. "An' thinks yuh it ain't hot, yuh listen to how yo' granny learnt to suck aigs. When she seems they's a cold, peaceful snap comin' around here, then is the time to watch yuhse'f."

"Meanin'?" Corson wondered thinly.

"Meanin', Corson, thet—Well, take 'er like this: This mornin' I sorta had what yuh'd call a pat hunch, like what yuh gets when yuh feel a man is bluffin' across a poker table, an' yuh call him, an' you are right. So I pasears around this way. Nary sign of anything outta the way, y' savvy.

"But the other day, I saw five head M Bar X stuff roamin' down this way Didn't drive them back, because I wasn't supposed to be this way, an' didn't want to stir up nothin'. This mornin', them steers is gone. From close to Hart Reddin's place. But they wasn't a sign of beef track leadin' into Split Pass. Yet they was sign where somebody had dragged something. Mebbeso a wet steer hide, to cover tracks.

"I moseyed towards the Pass, an' some low paisano thought I needed runnin' back. Yuh mebbe knows a lone rider can make more time than a man drivin' four-five head beef."

"Yeah. Can see. An'——"

"But, supposin' a cackle came up thet beef was missin'? From Bunner, mebbe? Has, some few times. We ride lickety-hell, but we never find no beef on them occasions. Never spot no trouble. Wonder would it mean they was jest false alarms, to account for stuff already run peacefully off?"

"It stands thinkin' over," Corson admitted, picking up his reins. "Reckon you'd want nothin' said about it? No? 'Sta bueno."

Arrived back at the ranch, Corson found Lock Bunner had ridden out. It was more than two hours before he returned. Tex, mending a saddle girth, drew a dark, sidelong glance from Bunner as the foreman passed him. Corson, lounging in the bunkhouse door, did not miss this at all.

Bunner came straight to him. "Corson, seems there's work for you," he snapped. "I been out counting over some stuff that was ranging toward the mountains. We're missing ten head, near as I could tally. If I was you, I'd have a look around down in Dirty Feet country."

Corson turned his head, that Bunner might not see the hard, cold way that came onto his face. His voice was low, studiedly indifferent when he replied. "I will, Bunner. I'll take a look down there."

V

PETE MILES called to Corson, and he went toward the house. He wondered why he was so glad of the call, so hopeful, and why he went so eagerly. They went into Pete's office and, over a drink, Pete Miles inquired:

"Jest how does it stack up to you, Corson? See anything you like?"

Wade Corson sipped his drink slowly, as though savoring his thoughts, or the fire in the liquor. "A lot I don't like," he said finally. "But, until I'm sure-positive, I wouldn't want to say where the seein' is. Tomorrow, I think I'll pasear through the mountains an' see what makes this Dirty Feet the sort of place she is. It never hurt no man none to know what's the other side of the hill."

"The hell it don't!" Pete Miles sententiously exclaimed. "It does—when the other side of that hill is Dirty Feet."

"Just the same," placidly, "I aim to go. Are you handlin' this? Or is it me?"

"Your paw all over—tellin' a man off right in his own house," Miles chuckled. "An' damn it, wasn't for ol' Bill's memory, I'd say you was a better man than him. The kind of young hairpin I'd admire to have around me a long, long time."

"Reckon that wouldn't be bad—only I got nothin' to tie me down," Wade Corson answered, his voice distant.

"Me, I'd like a spread of my own, where I could raise beef, an' buttons of my own."

"Uh-huh. Beef an' buttons. Wish you had the place Hart Reddin' has got. It ain't worth much, but with open range, an' stuff I would lease to the right man——"

"If you don't mind, and I may interrupt your dreams of beef, I'm coming in," Gloria said.

Wade Corson was instantly on his feet, his hat gripped tightly, looking at her in that probing, slow, deep way that seemed to draw her until she too must answer the look. With almost apparent effort, she looked away.

"I'm riding over to take Hart some fresh bread," she said. And then, as though on impulse, "If you haven't seen that country, Mr. Corson, I would be glad to have your company."

Pete Miles opened his gabboo, then closed it, looking at Corson shrewdly. And Wade Carson lied, "I rode out a spell this mornin', but not as far as where you are goin'." He followed her.

And only grinning, shrewd Pete Miles seemed to take notice that if Corson had not ridden toward Redding's that morning, he would not have known how far Hart Redding's was!

AS THE couple rode out of the yards, knees close together, Tex and Bud remarked their going with sterling interest.

"He don't lose him no time, an' Miss Gloria, she ain't so buckity when he's around," Bud observed.

"Close yuhr jaw," Tex growled. But he continued to watch, a hopeful something written on his face.

A silence fell between Gloria Miles and Corson, and the big basket of fresh bread and home-cooked viands he carried on his left arm was a reminder to Corson that his thoughts of her would do him no good.

Finally, she said, "I couldn't help overhearing you tell dad you were riding to Dirty Feet tomorrow. Is that safe?"

He shrugged. "Does a peckerwood ask if she's safe to hammer on a tree? He takes his chances. Mebbe he'll drum up a bear, or a cougar—an' mebbe somethin' worth while. I told Pete I'd see what I could do. That's part of it."

"Aren't you satisfied, now that you have run the last of your own troubles to earth and vindicated yourself?"

"Is a man ever satisfied?" he demanded, partly of himself. "He always wants somethin'. If it ain't excitement, long trails or trouble trails, it's peace, or a home, or power. An' mostly, he wants somethin' he can't have. A lot of times somethin' somebody else has already got. I——

"Ain't that Lock Bunner comin' this way? Is, a'right," he answered his own question, a dark look on his face. The girl, glancing sidewise at him, held her underlip between firm little teeth. She didn't speak, but there was a wondering way to her.

Lock Bunner, riding between two cactus-studded ridges, made so as to angle away from them. Then, perhaps realizing he had been seen, he came on toward them. They reined up close together.

"Making a visit, I see," Bunner said to Gloria.

"Yes. To Hart's. Is he home?"

Lock Bunner shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I ain't been in a couple miles of his place. Been tracing around about some cattle come up missing. I just get paid as a foreman, and not as a high-gun trouble-cutter. I ain't got no time to go riding around paying sociable calls."

He stared pointedly at Wade Corson as he made this little speech. Corson yawned. A sudden, disturbing thought ran, then, in Lock Bunner's mind. He snapped his fingers.

"By gosh, I am getting to be forgetful. I did see Redding. He was riding toward the mountains—likely looking for strayed stuff. We was half a mile apart, and we waved. So they ain't no use you making more miles for nothing. I'll ride back with you."

"If it was me, now," Wade Corson drawled, a taunting undercurrent in his voice, "I would go on an' leave this stuff with Mister Redding."

"That's the best idea. And he might have returned by now," Gloria agreed.

"G'bye, Mister Bunner. An' stop worritin' about them cows. I'm thinkin' cows ain't what your troubles is goin' to be. I'll let you know what I learn tomorrow in Dirty Feet."

He looked back, as he and the girl rode on, and gave Bunner a long and meaning look.

THE girl did not notice—but Wade Corson certainly did—the tracks of Bunner's horse led right to the rickety corral near Hart Redding's shack. Hart Redding himself was leading a saddled horse out. And he seemed none too pleased to see them.

His weak face indicated no pleasure when Gloria introduced him to Corson, and some pre-inspired fear and hate caused him to take the meeting without grace.

"I was just going out on important business, Gloria. Heard of a place just up in the mountains where five head of my stuff drifted into a pocket. A cowboy told me about it. So I got no time to lose."

"They tell me this here Dirty Feet is quite a pocket," Corson idly commented, rolling a cigarette.

Redding flashed him a quick glance. A hard one. "I—I don't know. I been there once or twice, just sightseeing."

Corson merely nodded. He handed Redding the basket and rode off a few feet, turning his back. Let Gloria and this weak-faced whey-belly have their moment. Yet, it occurred to Corson, there might be something to Redding if Gloria Miles liked him.

The girl came on. For more than a mile a silence with something tangible threaded onto it strung between them. Then Gloria burst out:

"Wade Corson, be honest with me! I feel there is something between you and Lock Bunner, and between you and Hart, too. I have never trusted Bunner. But you know how dad is. Mother and I have long ago learned not to butt into affairs outside the house."

"Well, Bunner ain't exactly a likable cuss. But somethin' between me an' Reddin'? Shucks, there never would be!"

"You're evading," she charged.

"What should I of said?" he challenged.

It stopped her. She moved her mount in nearer and, leaning, laid a small hand on his arm. Something electric, disturbing, vibrated him uncomfortably; uncomfortably because he knew his feeling would do no good.

"Wade—" she used his first name easily—"you think Hart is mixed up in this slow taking away of dad's beef. And Bunner lied. You knew that before we got to Hart's and found him just going out, I think."

Corson sighed.

"Wade, do something for me?"

"Anything under this sun!" he exclaimed, looking squarely at her. She seemed to choke and edged her horse away. Perhaps she did not trust herself—but of these things and of women, Wade Corson did not know.

"Hart is weak, Corson. He isn't like you. He needs a strong hand with him—not against him. I can't believe he would be into such a thing. But—but, Wade, if there is trouble, promise me you won't turn a hand against Hart Redding."

He was silent. Bitterly, darkly so.

"Y-you promised." It was an almost tearful plea.

"I promised," he almost snarled. "I hold my word."

No, he wouldn't harm Redding, because Gloria wanted him. He wanted the girl; he ached for her. A steely mood caught and held him, and to relieve his feelings, he promised himself that someone would catch hell in Dirty Feet!

VI

WADE CORSON and Bud Cole rode out from the M Bar X just as the little coyotes were yapping farewell to the night, and gray light was silhouetting the rising hills in the southwest. A gentle wind ran out of the east, whispering softly. It was grand to be alive.

Wade thought of life and said to Bud, "So Bunner told you to come along with me."

"He told Tex, too," Bud answered. "Tex told him Pete had given him orders to do somethin' else. Bunner, now, he didn't seem to like that overly big."

"You know what's likely to happen, Bud?"

"I got a li'l idee—but no notion how it'll be. But if you are willin' to stake on it, then so am I. Corson, you are the sort of cuss a fella warms to, an' has confidence in. Me, I am more interested than anything—seein' as I am with you. I only hope, when somethin' busts, I don't get scared as hell."

"An' I hope you do," Corson replied. "The man who ain't got nerve to be afraid some, he is a fool. Because all men don't show it, ain't no sign they ain't afraid. I always get that cold feelin' in my stummick, an' a ringin' in my ears—the brands of fear. But mebbe it's because I'm afraid you'll play that harp."

They crossed the flats, inclined into the foothills and before the sun was too well up, started up through Split Pass. In places wide enough for four to ride abreast; in other places, so narrow one could hardly squeeze through alone. The Split ran steep, and through rock and stunted evergreen growth.

"I ain't expectin' nothin' in the Pass—since Tex ain't with us an' Pete knows where we're goin'," Corson explained his lack of wariness. "If Bunner is in this, an' this is a trap, he wouldn't want us kilt on the trail. If we was kilt in Dirty Feet, that wouldn't lay to him, because we went in there huntin' trouble. On the trail, it would look like somebody was expectin' us, you see."

"An' I bet they is—in Dirty Feet," Bud opined.

The range was narrow here, and by ten o'clock, the sun cooking, blinding them, they came down the other side of the mountains and into Dirty Feet. Corson's quick glance instantly laid the place out in his mind.

A single gray, warped wooden structure housed a store; a meson, where horses, men, burros alike might be lodged, showed a crumbling adobe wall about a sand-piled patio and courtyard. There was a squat square adobe building opposite this, and it needed no expert to label this the cantina, or that life of Dirty Feet concentrated here. Adobe huts sat lonely, bleak, squatting in a ragged, sparse line toward the yellow gumbo flow of the Rio Grande. Sand dunes rolled away on the other side.

A place for the hunted, haunted, lost and on-the-hop, a safe passage for rustlers, or runners of contraband. A damned dangerous place—even worse than Wade Corson had expected.

As they came slowly down the twisting road, sullen yellow puffs of dust broke under their horses' hooves and hung reluctantly in the heated air when they had passed. The silence of the place became an oppressive, weighing thing, it was as though the hole that was Dirty Feet awaited something explosive and grim.

A RIDER came around an adobe hut toward the river and rode slowly toward Corson and Bud. A swart one, he was, his hat pulled low, his right hand near his gun.

"Whew-whew!" Bud whistled softly. "That's Swinzer—a bad one. I seen him here once. They ain't one thing good said about him."

Corson nodded and turned his head to the rear. As he had expected, another rider, a bullish sort of man, had ridden into the road behind them. And

now another came to stand leaning too carelessly against the wall of the meson across the road from the saloon.

"They ain't takin' no' chances, an' they aim for us to go into the cantina, looks like," Corson mumbled. They reined up at a gnawed and sagging hitchrail and hit the ground. "How you feelin', Bud?" Corson inquired.

Bud Cole wiped perspiration and dust from his face. "Like a June bride," he complained. "An' I ain't enjoyin' the fact I know them three. Swinzer, there. Kyle, the big one comin' the way we did. An' the one across the road is Alvarado. He's a knife an' gun artist from 'way back, cowboy. He'd rather kill than look at you."

"We oughta feel honored," Corson grunted, swinging across the dirt path and shoving into the saloon.

There were a half dozen nondescripts in the place, and a chalk-eyed devil at the bar who had gunman-killer written all over him. He packed two guns and a bowie knife thrust under his double-decker belt.

A light run of conversation ceased when Corson and Bud came in. Two men at a table halfway along the bar, pushed back and went hastily away. Corson grinned at the Mexican bartender, spun a coin on the bar and called for a pint.

"Come on, we'll sit a spell," he said to Bud, stepping to the table the two men had just vacated. "We'll hunker an' rest our bones."

Bud looked up. Swinzer was just coming through the door. "Rest your bones, hell," Bud groaned. "I think we gotta get out of here."

"Got your pistol handy?" Corson mumbled, tossing off a small drink. There was something in his voice that jerked Bud up, and it seemed Corson's eyes had gone from gray to inky black. "You take a man, an' you don't think of nothin' else but his belly," Corson warned.

He kicked back his chair and strode straight over to where Swinzer had stopped beside the bar. He didn't say a word. His left hand came up and around. The smack of it against Swinzer's cheek ringing loudly within the place.

THE unexpectedness of the move threw Swinzer off balance. He blinked stupidly, his mouth agape.

"Why'n hell waste time?" Wade Corson snarled.

Swinzer went for his gun, stepping backward as he did. Someone had warned him, no doubt, as to how Wade Corson fought. But Swinzer wasn't quick enough. Corson's leap carried him against the gunman, his left hand slapping down Swinzer's pistol. The pound of Corson's gun sent Swinzer twisting and whirling around. He tripped on his own feet, went down, tried to get up, then flopped back again.

Another gun roared a thunderous melody of death. Corson half-crouched and spun around. Bud Cole was standing beside the table, head thrust forward, his gun bursting smoke in jets, as an engine erupts blasts of steam.

Chalk-eye was hanging onto the bar, and Bud continued to shoot. He was stitching a neat row of holes in Chalk-eye, and Chalk-eye was already dead on his feet.

Tables crashed to the floor, a gun smacked and the lead of it plucked at Corson's shirt. He threw a shot into an overturned table and was rewarded with a frenzied howl. The bartender bobbed up, a scattergun in hand, and Bud, realizing Chalk-eye was gone, sent a slug at the barkeep's sweaty fat face. The slug made a long white streak across the bar, throwing varnish and splinters. The barkeep dropped his gun and pawed at his eyes.

"Come on," Corson cried. "The fools will all go kill-crazy in a minute—even them that ain't in on it."

He spun toward the door, Bud at his side. "Wait," Corson ordered. He half-turned, drove a shot through the top of a hat that showed over the top of an overturned table, then gave the bat-

wing doors a kick. Outside, a gun shoved sound through the thick, oppressive, heated air, and a bullet plowed through the doors.

"Kyle an' Alvarado," Corson snarled.

"Hell!" Bud groaned. "Some of these snakes huggin' the floor in here, they'll gang us in a minute. An' they ain't no back door, no winders to get out of. Kyle, he'll get more help——"

"Come on. He's gettin' that help now!"

Gun before him, Corson leaped through the doors and landed in the street in a semi-squatting position. Kyle lay full length in the hot dust of the road, motionless. Alvarado was running for a corner of the meson wall. Three guns filled the air with crashing sound.

Alvarado seemed to try going three or four ways at once. He went straight up off his feet and came down hard. From around a building up the street, old Tex Guymon came spurring; Bud and Corson ran over, grabbed Alvarado and dragged him into the meson patio.

"Whuh-where in hell you come from?" Bud gasped, eyeing Tex.

"He wasn't two mile behind us any time along the way," Corson explained. "Watch the inn, here. Mebbe somebody in there'll want to take this up an' make it personal."

"He ain't dead. Busted arm, leg, cut side," Tex grumbled, looking Alvarado over. He stooped, jerked a knife from Alvarado's belt. "He's goin' to talk, an' we ain't got no time to wait."

"Damn Bunner," the Mexican growled. "I die, I lay here. I say plenty. Redding runs beef into Pass after Bunner runs it to him. We take it, sell it across river, or peddle here. Bunner say you be easy. Now look. All dead——"

"Code of the outlaw," Tex sniffed. "Never talk. Hell!"

The trio went out. Bud, Corson got their horses. Not a soul, not even a dog or chicken, showed in Dirty Feet. Not a shot came their way. Save for Alvarado's yells for someone to come and attend to him, the place was a city of the dead.

"The peckerwoods," as Corson would have said, "had lighted on Dirty Feet and pecked themselves a hole."

VII

THEY HAD come back through Split Pass, and Hart Redding's place was but a mile ahead. They stopped. Bud Cole, pale, a blue look about his mouth, sagged weakly in the saddle.

"I'm tellin' you again," Corson said, "it ain't nothin' to be sick about. You kilt him when he was tryin' to get you. Forget that chalk-eyed devil, Bud. Play a li'l piece on your harp."

"Then I'll be sick," Tex groaned.

Bud brightened a bit and reached for his pocket. The sick look went off his face and anger replaced it there. "That dirty, chalk-glimmered, gut-shootin' son-of-a-civet!" he raged. "Wish I had him here now. I'd shoot him again. An' to think I been feelin' bad over the killin' of him."

He didn't stop to think how near he had come to catching one of Chalk-eye's slugs. He hadn't even known, of course, it had been done. A bullet had sliced through the pocket where he carried his precious harp, and had wrecked that caterwauling instrument!

Tex and Corson laughed, and then fell serious. They moved on toward Redding's shack again. Dusk was falling, and they could see a pinpoint of lamplight through a window.

"Remember what I said," Corson admonished, a bitter note in his voice. "It's for Gloria."

"An' thet's the onliest thing thet'd make me agree," Tex spat.

They came quietly up behind the little stable, dismounted, went quickly to the house. Without knocking, Corson kicked the door open and thrust inside. Redding spun from the stove, his face suddenly tight and strained. The grim, cold visages of the men shook him, the

skillet of potatoes in his hand, went clattering to the floor.

"Wh-what is it?" he whispered hoarsely.

Tex, one hand behind his back, now brought it into sight. There was a lariat in it.

"No use in beggin' or talkin', Reddin'," Corson snarled. "We know yo' part in this stealin', know it was you took the word to Dirty Feet that I was comin'."

"No-no!" Redding broke words frantically out of a constricted throat and loose mouth. "I—no!"

He ducked, too late. Tex had flipped the rope quickly with a small loop. It settled over Redding and tightened about his neck. He screamed and clawed at the rope, then went to his face on the floor as Tex jerked hard on his end of it.

Tex and Corson laid hold of the lariat and almost ran outside. They didn't handle Hart Redding gently, but it wasn't their intent that he should ever forget this moment.

Pawing, struggling, Redding was pulled along behind them. At the stable, Corson kicked him to his feet.

"Saddle his horse, Bud," he curtly commanded.

"You going to let me go, Corson?" Redding beseeched.

"To hell—where you belong," Corson snarled. "Shut up!" He slapped Redding twice. A sick look was on Corson's face, and Tex's, too. It was a sickening thing to see anything built like a man, go so weak and watery. Corson kicked Redding when Redding would have gone down on his knees to beg.

He seized Redding, and Tex used a pigging string to bind the struggling, screaming man's hands behind his back. Bud came back with Redding's saddle horse, and they picked him up and flung him into the saddle.

A beam stuck out from under the ridge of the stable. Tex flung the rope over it and tied it to a protruding sill.

Redding mounted, hands behind him, sat rigid in the saddle, crying hoarsely, begging in a terrible way.

"We're leavin' now," Corson said. "Pretty soon, this horse is goin' to get tired, an' move. When he does, you jig on wind. Think that over, Reddin', while you are waitin' for the end."

Redding's imploring, frantic voice ran on after them as they got their horses and rode off into the gloom.

They circled, walked back. Redding's sobbing, his praying, went on monotonously. Corson sneaked around the corral, found a small rock, set himself. He hurled the rock. Redding's horse jumped and started off at a run.

THE scream of a soul tortured in the bottom pit of hell came from Redding. It changed to a wild shriek of relief. For the rope had parted just back of the hondo, and Redding was free! He would never know how Tex had used a knife on that rope while he, Redding, was begging Wade Corson to spare his life!

Hands behind his back, Redding drove his heels into his horse's ribs. Later, many, many miles later, he would stop and work his hands free. Now, all he wanted was to be miles away from there. And he would never come back again!

Which was the thing they had counted on.

"Now for Mister Lock Bunner," Bud growled as they went on toward M Bar X. "An' you know, Corson, I betcha Miss Gloria ain't goin' to feel so bad, after all, about Reddin' hightailin' it yonderly."

"She ain't goin' to feel badly towards you an' Tex," Corson mumbled. "But me—well, it was my idea, an' me that started this."

Savagely then he ground out, "An' as for Lock Bunner—I ain't liked him from the word 'go,' an' he ain't liked me. Lock Bunner, he ain't nobody for you to fool with, an' don't fool yourself he is. An' in the second place, Lock Bunner is my tree, an' I'm the peckerwood that's goin' to try my beak

on him, so you jest leave him to me."

They came to the ranch long after dark, left their horses and went to the house. It was Gloria who opened the door for them; it was Gloria who drew Corson aside, a great question in her eyes.

"Hart Reddin'," Corson mumbled, looking over her head, "is gone. I am sorry, but it was all I could do. We scared him off."

"I'm glad!" she said fervently. "Glad you didn't harm Hart."

"Yeah!" Corson snapped, turning to go into Pete Mile's den.

Pete was quiet while Corson related what had happened. Then:

"Ain't no use in callin' myse'f a fool," the old rancher said bitterly. "Thing is, what we goin' to do about him? Ain't no law to speak on, an' what they is couldn't convict him on what we got. If we run him off, he'll go back to Dirty Feet an' plague hell out of us."

"Nope. Outta the devil," Corson said flatly. "I'm callin' Bunner's hand."

"Bunner ain't easy," Pete Miles warned. "You got no call to do more than you've done."

"No call? He tried to rope me in on a sandy first time we met. He's been stealin' from you, an' you was a partner of my dad. He tried to have me sewed in a sack an' kilt today. An' I hired on to clear this thing up. Hell, man! How much call does it need, if that ain't enough?"

He turned on his heel, and in that abrupt, startling manner of his, left the room. Pete, Tex, Bud, all followed him. In the hall Gloria stopped Tex.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Wade Corson is goin' to leave the place without a foreman," Tex said. And added, wearily, "I suppose, now, I'll have to take over until another man can be found. Dammit!"

"You mean he's going to kill Bunner?"

"He is goin' to try," Tex said.

"Not try!" she cried. "He's got to, if that's what must be done."

Tex looked his sudden understanding, opened his mouth, saw the tears standing in her eyes, and hurried on outside.

He caught up with Pete and Bud a few steps from the bunkhouse.

Corson's flat body was framed in the light of the opened door. Bunner was not inside. Corson turned away. Lock Bunner came walking up from the corrals just as Corson turned.

"A-h-h-h!" Bunner croaked, his voice the quaver of a man who sees a ghost.

He was driven, then, to sudden action. Wade Corson could not fight as usual, driving in to break up another's draw. Yards separated them. With practiced skilled ease Bunner's hand fell, came up, and his gun ran flame.

VIII

CORSON leaped sideways off the single step before the bunkhouse door, dragging his pistol clear. The slug Bunner pushed at him made a smacking sound into the wooden wall. Bunner fired again as Corson got out of the fall of light from the doorway, the bullet fairly singeing Corson's right ear.

And then Corson was moving forward, firing as he came. Bunner's maddened curse came above the beat of guns that sent pointers of flame into the darkness. And then Bunner had turned and was running toward the corral. Corson went after him. Bunner stopped, fired, ran again. Pushing through the darkness after the gloom-hulking figure of Bunner, Corson shook lead out of his gun.

He stopped abruptly, then seemed to be shoved back, and a loud agonized grunt was forced from him. On his hands and knees he sought the gun he had dropped.

Bunner ran on. He reached the corral—and still he tried to keep going. He ran face-on into the poles, recoiled, rocked on his heels and went flat onto his back.

His feet and hands made patting sounds in the dust, sounds that slowed then ceased. Bunner's wide eyes gazed

up at the stars. They were stars he would never see again. What shot had got him, no one would ever know. The thing was, Lock Bunner had been "got."

Tex, Pete Miles, Bud, ran to Wade Corson, who was sitting on the ground, his hands to his stomach. Men spilled out of the bunkhouse, and Gloria, crying between set teeth, came running across the yard.

"Huh-hell of a place for a wuh-waterin' trough, noways!" Corson gasped. "I smacked dab into 'er, an' damn nigh busted myse'f right in two!"

It broke the tension, eased away the grim aftermath, the strain of gunfight and sudden death. Pete Miles and Tex on either side of him, Corson got back his wind. The three went toward the house. Gloria, tears of thankfulness coursing down her cheeks, turned and ran on ahead.

They went into Pete's den and got a jug.

THIS country needs men like you, Corson, jest like it took an hombre like your paw, in them trailin' days," Pete declared. "I'm needin' a foreman——"

"Make this stubborn ol' mule, Tex, take over," Corson cut in. "Me, I go in for myself, after this. Or not at all."

"Then why not take over the Redding place? I'll give you lief to run your stuff with mine, an'——"

Again Corson interrupted. "They's reasons why I can't do that, either," he advised. He finished his drink and arose.

As he reached the door leading from the hall into the living room, Gloria stepped out.

"I—I guess I am a shameless eavesdropper," she confessed. "But I heard you speak of leaving. Must you?"

She came quite close to him and the old tingle was running through him once more. She looked up at him.

"Must I?" he echoed. "What else can I do? You asked for 'er, an' I'll tell you. I can't stay here, around you."

"Why?"

"Because—because you ought to know. How I feel about you, I mean. An' after you lovin' Hart Reddin'——"

"Love—Hart—Redding!" she exclaimed. And then she began to laugh. "You goose. I was concerned about Hart for one reason. I went to school with Hart's sister. He always was a problem to her and his family. When he came here I tried to help him because of her. And maybe this scare will straighten him out. But love him——"

She started to laugh again. The laughter abruptly ceased. Wade Corson had closed her lips in a way they both enjoyed.

Adventurers All

A LOST RIVER

I WAS the youngest member of a party of American engineers engaged in the survey of a vast tract of barren land in Southern Siberia, on which England, Russia and America were supposed to spend a certain amount of time and money.

England and Russia, alike, had failed to locate a certain river, reported years before. We, too, failed, after several reconnaissances, to find any trace of this much sought-after river. Our chief decided as a last resort to carefully examine the coast line, hoping to find where it entered the sea.

A small ship was chartered and each morning we would take a row boat and go in as close to the shore as possible. This itinerary was carried on for about a week. On the morning on which occurred the events that go to make up this story we came in sight of a point of land on which we decided to land; we watched with much interest the amusing spectacle of great bands of wild boars or hogs feeding on fish thrown up by the tide. Our curiosity was also aroused when, all at once as if obeying a command like a well trained army, they turned and raced for the shore. But their order did not last long, for soon their frightened squeals and grunts rose above the roar of the breakers and in their frantic efforts to gain the mainland, many of them were trodden to death. The reason for this rush was incomprehensible to us, for the tide was still low, but this seemingly peculiar incident was clear before the day was over.

When we landed, not a creature was in sight. As we beached the boat, we had quite an exciting time killing a huge snake, and though reptiles have no particular horror to me, still this fellow was such an ugly customer, he made an unpleasant impression on me. Likely other members of our party felt much the same and possibly this was responsible in a measure for the insecure anchorage of our boat, for not long after we found that it had dragged anchor and disappeared. Our ship was far beyond hailing distance and seemed to be heading out to sea. We climbed a slight elevation and the reason for the pigs' pell-mell race flashed upon us and filled us with apprehension and horror. The promontory narrowed to less than one hundred feet in width, and the rising water had met and formed a seething whirlpool, against which no living thing could fight, and which had cut us off from the mainland. The water was rising with amazing rapidity. Speechless with fright, I realized that we stood on an island which soon would be submerged.

In the distance near a small island, we saw a fishing smack of native oyster divers. We hollered ourselves hoarse in an attempt to attract their attention, keenly realizing all the while the value of the moments which we were, as it soon became apparent, wasting.

Only one man in the party beside myself was a good swimmer, and when he decided to make the attempt to swim out to the fishermen, I accompanied him. No sooner had I slipped into the water than the thought of that horrible snake we had killed came into my mind and chilled me with fear; the current was strong and dead against us and we soon realized that the task we had undertaken was no child's play. We swam rapidly, resting only when almost exhausted. When we had covered about one-third of the way, my companion gave up, saying our effort was useless, and that he was going back to take his chance with the rest of the party on the island. To my idea, there was no hope of rescue on that

rapidly disappearing bit of ground, so I said I was going to reach that boat—though I doubted that my strength would hold out that long. He gave me the handkerchief in which he had tied all the money the party had, and turned back. I went on, and the horror of the remaining part of that swim I shall never forget. I had never before in my young life attempted to swim so far, the current was strong and against me. Every time a bit of seaweed, or some finny denizen of the sea struck me or floated near me, I shuddered and I know that I would have died of fright had I encountered a snake like the one we had killed. Then, too, the hope of reaching the fishing boat and inducing its occupants to return in time to save my comrades was so small that my impatience over the progress I was making became almost agony.

How I finally reached the rocks where the fishing smack was anchored, I now have but a blurred, although frightful recollection. In the boat stood a powerful native, drawing up his companion, who had dived into the water as I approached. As I stumbled over the rocks, I shouted, gesticulated and displayed the money, and attempted in every possible way to make known to them the predicament of my companions and the great need for haste. I became crazed by the stolid indifference with which the divers worked on. I might have been a part of the rocks upon which I stood, so far as they were concerned. In desperation I decided that when the larger man went down again I would throw myself on the smaller man, grab his knife, either wound or kill him, if necessary, and so be ready for the second man when he came to the surface. In my excitement and distress, I did not take into account that I was but a boy, all tired out from my strenuous swim, and that even at my best, no match for either of those Mongolians. Naturally, my attempt was a miserable failure. However, when the other diver answered his mate's call and clambered into the boat, I once more continued my gestures, and pointed to the faintly visible speck of land and my five companions, who were waving the red flag which we used in our work. At last, as I again held out the money, pointed, and grabbed the oars, they understood, and soon had their small craft spinning over the water; the current I had fought so hard against carried us back like a mill race, but my hopes for reaching my friends were almost gone, so much precious time had been lost and I figured the strong tide would have exhausted their strength and swept them off their foothold. Those last passing moments were hours of sweating agony to me; but to cut a long story short, we were not too late, though the water had reached the chin of the shortest man. All my fatigue was forgotten as I leaped over the side of the boat and helped to drag my benumbed comrades aboard. A thoroughly exhausted party, we lay in the bottom of that boat and directed our rescuers to our ship.

But, after all, much of the sting of our sufferings was appeased when the next day, with much caution, we again visited the scene of our adventure, and learned the cause of the abnormally high tide and the sudden rise of the water. I am sure that not one of our party will ever forget how we succeeded where the English and the Russians had failed—for we had located the mouth of that mysterious river.

G. Marion Caldwell

For your Library List!

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I

"That's the way to handle Indians—shoot 'em up!"

IT IS an afternoon in June. A few miles west of old Fort Laramie the wide, dusty Oregon-California trail sprawled its way eastward beside the North Platte River. Gray dust-covered sage filled the flats and lapped up around the ragged hills like the tide of a monotonous sea. Rocky hills, with the red scars of dry ravines, like leprous sores, ran up to ragged peaks covered with stunted pines. A raw, savage, unfriendly land.

Away to the south, across dusty flats and rugged foothills, high on shimmering heat waves, rode the cool white peaks of the Rockies—the "Shining Mountains" of the old trappers.

On the flat south of the trail a string of black spots were dead buffalo drying in the sun—killed for their tongues by a passing emigrant train.

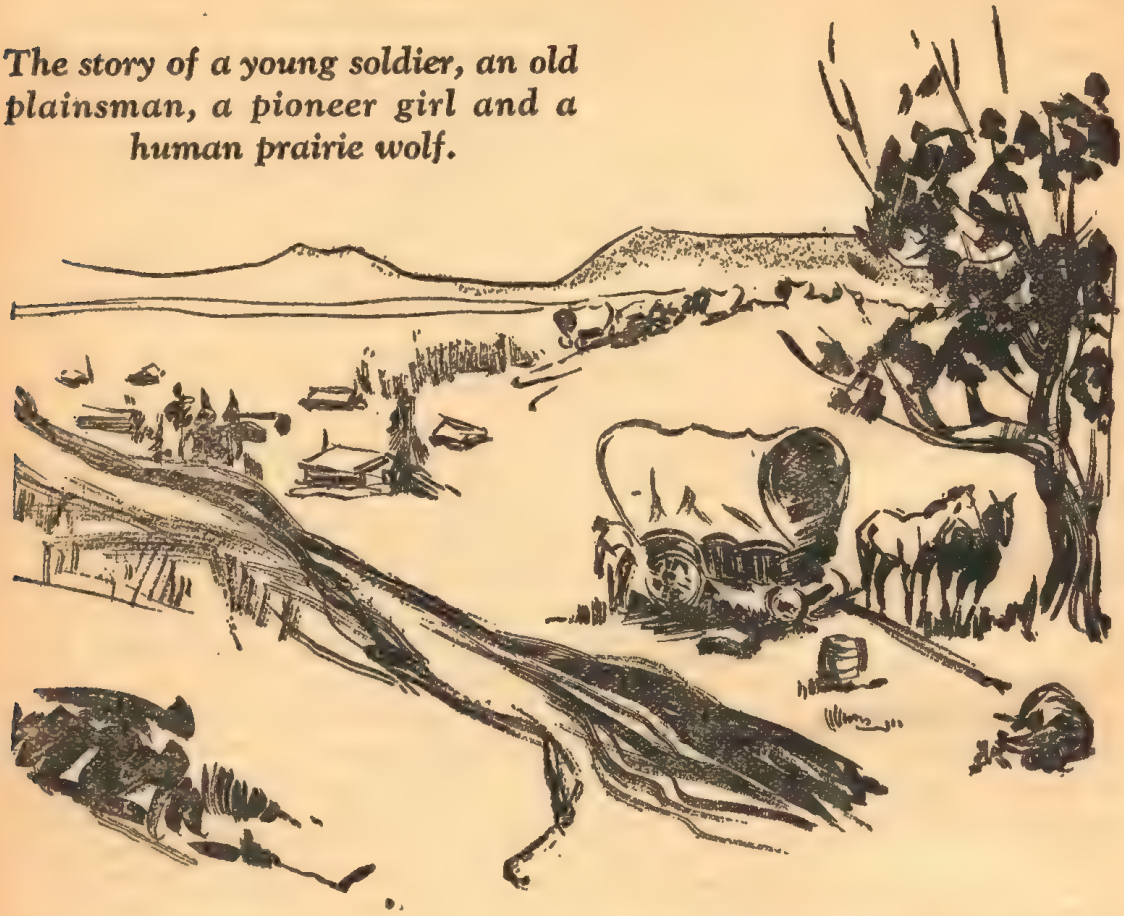
A click of stones among the pines on the hill north of the river, and a naked Indian rode slowly out from among the trees, sat there a moment in the sunshine with hand shading his eyes, intently searching the landscape. Reassured by his long scrutiny the young son of the great plains came on down the slope, his pony picking a way among the rocks on dainty feet.

More movement up in the growth of

SOLDIERS COME

By W. H. B. Kent

The story of a young soldier, an old plainsman, a pioneer girl and a human prairie wolf.



pines, and a group of mounted warriors came into view—a screen of scouts thrown out in front of a village on the move. They came on down the hill, the sun flashing on polished lance heads, on gay streamers of red cloth and eagle feathers fluttering in the wind.

They splashed across the river with talk and laughter. Water dripping from wet horses left dark spots in the dust. The group rode on into the flat, talked a while about a camp site, and then dismounted.

Seated on the ground, a slim lad, a boy of twelve, brought a feathered, long shafted pipe. Fire was made and with grave obeisance the Cheyenne Chief, Thunderhawk, blew whiffs of smoke to the four corners of the earth to propitiate the gods. The pipe traveled slowly around the circle as the warriors smoked and waited.

The village procession came pouring down the rocky hillside. A colorful riot of horses, men, women, children and dogs. Thunderhawk's band of Northern Cheyennes were wealthy. Gay with color, they streamed down the slope and laughed and shouted as they splashed into the river.

The women drove the pack animals and travois to their proper places in the tribal encampment, forming a wide circle around the little group of seated warriors. The flat bustled with life, color and movement. Piles of tepee poles and covers, clothing, robes, dried meat and cooking utensils were strewn around. Boys drove the horses up the river to better grass. A horde of wolfish dogs padded here and there on silent

feet sniffing, stealing, fighting, yelping.

Out of the confusion spidery tepee poles rose. With a flapping sound the buffalo hide covers were thrown up, brought around the poles and pegged into place. Women began gathering dry sage and bringing water from the river. The acrid smoke of burning brush hung in the air. Within an hour small children were playing among the tepees and the older ones were out, doing their chores or playing at make-believe war. There was an air of peaceful content as if the village had been there always.

IN THE late afternoon, when the tepees cast long pointed shadows, a young boy called, shrilly, and the vagrant noises of the village hushed. Warriors listened alertly, then lost their sudden tense interest and wandered idly out to where the boy was pointing at a sick cow. A cow of the white people.

The presence of human beings had raised dim hopes of care and feed, and the poor cow had stumbled along down to the Indian village. She stood there now with drooping head, footsore and emaciated, staring with eyes of dumb misery.

The cow had been yoked to help drag a wagon and the yoke had left raw wounds. Magpies had been at work on the open sores, digging out raw flesh and carrying away dripping chunks for their young. Footsore, unworkable, half dead, she had been abandoned by some emigrant.

Someone called to an ancient warrior, old Plenty Coups, that here was the fresh rawhide he was asking for. An old man came from his tepee, stringing a bow as he came. Gnarled fingers drew the feathered shaft to his ear; the string twanged, and the cow was dead.

Old Plenty Coups drew a long knife and quickly stripped a piece of rawhide from along the back of the cow—and old Plenty Coups had started a war that cost millions of dollars and hundreds of lives.

THAT same day, a few miles to the east of the Cheyenne encampment two men were sitting on a bench under the adobe walls of old Fort Laramie. At their backs the mud walls of the trading post rose high above their heads. To the left, at the corner, a bastion jutted out with portholes commanding the outer walls. At their right the heavy log gate of the one entrance was thrown back. Over the gate a squat tower provided room for a lookout. A sentry in the yellow striped, blue uniform of United States Dragoons paced back and forth before the open gate.

Formerly the property of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, the fort was now occupied by three troops of dragoons. The soldiers were stationed at this remote frontier post this summer to provide protection and assistance to the ever increasing flood of travel between "The States" and Oregon and California.

The old man sitting on the bench was one of the fast disappearing brotherhood of old-time free trappers. He was now chief of scouts at Fort Laramie. Clad in fringed buckskin frock, leggings and moccasins, white hair falling on his shoulders, a sweeping white moustache, and a great beak of a nose. His fierce, alert gray eyes belied the white hair. A short barreled percussion-cap rifle lay across his lap. On the rifle stock, worked out in brass tacks, was the name "Sante Fe."

The young man on the bench, a man of twenty-seven, was tall and lean, with dark hair and a keen face. Sun and wind of the great plains had bronzed his face nearly as dark as the leathery skin of the old scout beside him. He was dressed in the yellow faced, dark blue uniform of a Lieutenant of Dragoons. On duty as officer of the day, his long sabre was pulled around and stood upright between his knees. With hands clasped on the hilt and wide, black hat brim pulled down to shade his eyes, he was watching an emigrant train preparing to pull out on

the long and arduous road to Oregon.

The old plainsman was rumbling along with his memories, "I was scouting for old Taylor in the Mexican War."

This roused Lieutenant Dunham to put in, with young regret, "I was at the Point then. Just too late. Probably won't be any more wars. Just my luck to be born ten years too late."

Old Sante Fe shook his head, "I dunno. Seems like I ain't so keen about fighting as I used to be. Wars is fool business." He went on, earnestly, "but you'll see aplenty if you stay out here —and things going on like they are now. These fool emigrants and gold hunters boiling through here, scaring off the buffalo, using up the grass and raising hell with the Injuns."

David Dunham mused thoughtfully, "There is talk of a breech-loading, repeating rifle. If that is perfected it will put an end to war." He spoke a little regretfully. "Think of it, Sante Fe, seven or eight shots a minute! Human nature can't stand up to anything like that."

"No, nor the buffalo, neither," grumbled old Sante Fe.

The two lapsed into silence idly watching the emigrant train on the flat below pulling out on the trail for the west. Men yelled and cracked their whips, oxen surged into yokes, women called and waved to other people still in camp. Bustle, noise and confusion. A cloud of dust arose and half obscured the long wagon train as it strung out on the trail. It dipped over a low ridge, crawled slowly up into sight again and then disappeared over the last rise. This train left one wagon still camped on the flat.

Old Sante Fe shrugged, muttering, "'Nother man give up. Going back to the States to live with his wife's folks."

THE fort was on a level bench land with a steep bank down to the river flat. Down to the right, between the Platte and Laramie rivers were a few log houses—the headquarters of various traders with their stores and saloons. Beyond these dirt-roofed log buildings were groups of tepees—some Cheyenne, Dacotah and Arapahoe. On the flat, also, could be seen the slowly crumbling walls of a still older Fort Laramie. Beyond these the Laramie came down swiftly from the mountains to the south, rolling and sparkling along in the sunshine to its union with the Platte.

There was a flutter of cloth on the other side of the Laramie, and old Sante Fe and Lieutenant Dunham saw a girl, alone, walk hurriedly down to the stream and start wading across. The icy water came to her hips.

"H-m," Sante commented. "Guess she got left, looks like. She's sure in a hurry."

The girl came up out of the river, water dripping from sodden skirts, stopped a moment, looking around uncertainly, then started for the fort. Drunken loungers down at the traders' spoke to her, Indian women stopped their work to stare, and Indian children scuttled out of her way. She came on, dragging wet skirts, on listless feet up the steep bank to the fort.

Sante Fe and Dunham were on their feet as the girl came up to them and suddenly Sante Fe exclaimed, "Ketch her," and Dunham put his arm around the swaying girl. The girl stiffened and pushed him away, saying, "Take your hands off me," and closed her eyes and swayed.

Old Sante Fe stepped quickly and took the girl in the crook of his buckskin arm, speaking softly, "There now. There now. You're among your friends, and they ain't a thing to worry about."

The girl gave one swift look into the fierce gray eyes of the old scout and sagged back against his arms.

"You come on with me," Sante Fe went on, gently leading the girl into Fort Laramie. "I'll turn ye over to Ma Hurley and you'll be all right. And there ain't nothing to worry about. Can't nobody touch you here."

Lieutenant Dunham stood and

watched them disappear into the gloomy portal, annoyed at the action of the girl. "Damn emigrants," he said and went back to the bench. He sat there, waiting for Sante Fe, and became still more annoyed when he found he could still see a tall, slender girl with a cloud of black hair and wide, frightened gray eyes.

SANTE FE led the girl to the quarters of Hurley, the sutler, and called for Mrs. Hurley, telling her, aside, "Here's a stray, Ma Hurley. You jest look after her."

"Oh, the poor dear!" and grim-faced Ma Hurley softened and took the girl in her arms, crooning over her, "You poor dear! You come in here with Ma Hurley."

Sante Fe hung by the door, and after long and silent motioning drew Mrs. Hurley out again, whispering to her, "No, I don't know nothing about it—she jest drifted in here. But now don't you go pestering her with questions—"

"You! Sante Fe!" and Ma Hurley swelled with indignation. "You trying to tell me what to do? You get out of here."

Sante Fe snickered, "Well, keep your shirt on, Ma, keep your shirt on," and he padded away on moccasined feet content that the girl was in kind and competent hands.

Sante Fe came out and seated himself beside David Dunham, shaking his head with concern. "Something wrong," he said. "She ain't jest lost. She's scared. Scared bad. Something wrong somewhere." After a minute he added, "Pretty thing."

Lieutenant Dunham shrugged his indifference. He was not, he told himself, interested in emigrant women. This one was now safe in the fort and that ended it, so far as he was concerned.

Captain Maxwell came lounging out the gate—a stout, whiskey-faced, overbearing person. "Move over, Dunham," he ordered. I'm all worn out just from existing in this place."

Maxwell slumped down on the bench beside Dunham and went on in his loud, blustering voice, "I take over at guard mount today. Well, I'd rather be officer of the day than not. Something to occupy your time. And I'm going to police this place up. Ain't going to be any lousy Indians hanging around while I'm on duty."

David Dunham suppressed his dislike for Maxwell. As an officer in the same troop, and living the restricted life at Fort Laramie, the only solution was a deliberate attempt at toleration. But the very fact of conceding the necessity of being good natured in their enforced intimacy made him dislike Maxwell all the more.

Maxwell's voice boomed out, "I'd like to know what we're here for anyway?"

" 'Tain't no use to ask me," old Sante Fe answered, and Dunham laughed. He knew quite well what Sante Fe thought.

Maxwell was impervious to Sante Fe's innuendos. He went on, "We're here to keep the Indians quiet, and the way to do that is to keep the devils on the run. That's what I say." He said it as if that settled the matter and went on, "I'd like to get one good crack at them. I'd teach them something they wouldn't forget. That's the way to handle Indians—shoot them up. Colonel Holcomb has promised I'm to have the first expedition against hostiles and I hope it comes soon. I'll teach 'em something."

Maxwell got to his feet, pulled his tunic to rights and lounged off with the farewell, "See you at guard mount, Dunham."

"Yah," muttered Sante Fe, "his mother can pray he don't never get no chance at them."

"Oh, he's all right," Dunham clannishly defended. Then he conceded, "Talks a little too much sometimes."

"Yeah," agreed Sante Fe, "too much and the wrong kind. And some of these days he'll start that mouth of his in the wrong place."

IN THE evening Sante Fe strolled down to the one wagon that had not followed the emigrant train west earlier in the day. Another train was just pulling in. Feeling secure in the vicinity of the fort, the wagons were not parked in the usual circle. Everybody stopped where they saw fit and began hurriedly to unyoke the oxen and make camp before dark. Men went off into the dusk looking for sage brush for fires. Each train that arrived had farther to go to find wood. Men were talking and arguing and asking around where they had better drive the stock to find the best grass. Some were complaining because earlier outfits had used up the grass close at hand. They said it ought to be stopped.

Fires began to twinkle, tin dishes to rattle, and women and children to talk and fuss over the preparation of supper. The good smell of frying salt pork came to Sante Fe and he wished he had eaten more supper.

A man in rusty black came from the wagon that stood off by itself. He walked over to one of the fires and, after greeting, began earnestly questioning the group of people waiting for supper.

Sante Fe could see the man plainly as he stood in the firelight talking to the emigrants. A youngish man, tall and spare, a long face with deep set eyes. A long nose came down over a wide thin mouth that drooped at the corners. The man was steeped in an air of sour piety.

Sante Fe didn't like the man's looks and he started on toward the next fire. Then he caught a few words of the talk and stopped, absorbed, listening.

"Yes," the man in black was saying, "My brother. She killed him, but she got away. Ain't none of you seen a girl, alone, by herself, have you?"

The emigrants were interested—it was something to talk about, an event to relieve the monotony of travel. They crowded around the man, excited questions tumbling over each other.

The man in black talked in a high voice. Rather dead voice with little human warmth in it. "My name is Monk," he said. "Bound for Oregon. She was traveling with us. Wanted to git to Californy to find her father, she said."

"No," he went on in answer to questions, "I don't know why she done it. But I'm going to find her. It don't make no difference why she done it. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' If it takes ten years I'm going to see her hung."

More questions from the families, and nodding of heads in approval. One of the emigrants noticed the buckskin-clad figure of Sante Fe leaning on his rifle and pointed to him.

"Probably that 'ere man lives out here. Mebbe he seen something of the girl. Ask him."

The emigrant didn't wait for Monk, but himself questioned Sante Fe, "Hey, old man, you see ary girl around here?"

The others turned and looked at Sante Fe, silent an instant, waiting for the old scout to answer.

Sante Fe shifted his grasp on the rifle, thinking a minute before he answered. He didn't like the looks of the man, Monk, and he never had liked emigrants anyway. He felt as the Indians did about them. Besides, the poor girl was alone, friendless. He looked Monk over, speculating, and concluded if he had a brother he probably needed killing anyway.

The emigrant asked again, "Have ye seen ary girl?"

"Who? Me?" asked Sante Fe, " 'Tain't no use to ask me. I wouldn't know a gal if I was to see one."

The emigrants turned back to Monk with more talk and suggestions. They rolled the morsel of excitement over their tongues and enjoyed it thoroughly. "Killed his brother. Bad, very bad. Seems like things were hard enough without girls killing people. What with the Indians and all, life ain't safe out here. The government ought to do something about it."

Monk was talking again, "She can't git away. Ain't no place for her to git

to. And besides, I'm seeing that she don't."

Sante Fe spat with disgust, threw the rifle up in the crook of his arm and, on soft moccasined feet, sought the fort.

II

"She's the one that killed my brother."

A DIM light shone through the cracks in the door of Lieutenant Dunham's one-room quarters. When Sante Fe raised the latch, Dunham looked up from where he was writing in his diary. A tallow candle was stuck in the neck of a whiskey bottle, the white grease dripping down the side. A little cloud of flies whirled about the light. Many dead flies were imprisoned in the hot drip from the candle. Dunham blew a cloud of smoke from his pipe and the flies disappeared for a minute.

Sante Fe softly closed the door and sat awhile on the cot saying nothing. When Dunham had gone back to his writing he spoke to him.

"You remember that wagon, David, that stayed here today?"

Dunham nodded, going on with his writing.

"And you remember the gal that came in here this afternoon?"

Dunham nodded again, not much interested.

"Wal," Sante Fe went on, "They's a long nosed person named Monk says she killed his brother."

Dunham laid down his pencil now and looked at Sante Fe, but the old scout's words had made no particular impression. He continued to stare and old Sante Fe moved restlessly, finally saying again, as if to himself, "Yeah, he says she killed his brother."

As Sante Fe said it, it sounded impossible. He was talking about something that had happened far off, long ago, about people of whom David had never heard. That slim, tall girl with the cloud of black hair and wide, frightened gray eyes. What was the old man talking about anyway?

Dunham shifted in his chair, picked up a plug of tobacco and examined it carefully. Then he asked, "Why did she?"

"I didn't find out," Sante Fe complained. He seemed to be apologizing for the whole matter. After awhile he added, "But this man Monk is looking for her. Says he's going to see her hung." Pessimistically the old man added, "Well, mebbeso. But I doubts it."

THE next morning, Colonel Holcomb, Captain Maxwell, Lieutenant Dunham and old Sante Fe were standing by the flag pole. They were talking idly, loath to start their various duties which could not possibly be stretched out to fill the day and relieve them of boredom. In the still air of early morning the bright flag hung limply against the pole. The little parade ground within the fort was tramped flat and dusty from the booted and moccasined feet of long years. The living quarters of the old fur-trading days, now the barracks of the Dragoons, stretched in a continuous succession of log cabins around three sides, their doors and occasional windows opening on the parade ground. On two sides the quarters were of one story and only slightly sloping roofs. The roofs provided a platform from which men could fire over the walls. At the back end of the fort, opposite the entrance, the quarters were of two stories, the upper story with a narrow gallery along the front and reached by a flight of steps at one end.

The work of the day was going forward, rather briskly in sight of the officers and drowsily elsewhere. Two soldiers, prisoners, with splint brooms were cleaning up around the quarters under the painstaking direction of a guard with a loaded carbine on his shoulder. As soon as the officers went away, the guard would become casual and listless, carrying on a mumbling conversation out of the side of his

mouth with the two surly prisoners.

The two prisoners, inmates of the guard house for a few days for being quite obviously drunk at retreat, perfectly understood the guard's point of view. They worked steadily, though with a sullen and abused air. They, too, as soon as the officers went away, would change their air to one of listless cheerfulness. But if they didn't act unhappy over their arrest they might get twice as long next time. Next time would be the first payday—or a good night at three card monte.

A sentry, very spic and span in his dark blue tunic with lighter blue breeches tucked into shining boots, was pacing up and down before the orderly room. Across the way, on a bench before a cabin that had wooden bars over the window, some of the soldiers of the guard were seated. This was the guard house, and another sentry was passing back and forth. The rest of the guard were lounging on a bench in the gloomy entranceway to the fort. The soldier on duty in the lookout tower over the gate was actively on watch, showing himself frequently at the windows. As soon as the officers were out of sight he could sit down on an empty beer keg where he could look out the windows merely by turning his head.

MUMBLING talk came from the store where some soldiers were checking over equipment and supplies. The clear ring of a hammer on iron came from the blacksmith shop where the farrier was at work. Two soldiers were holding horses out in front and arguing in low tones as to just what the farrier should do about the off forefoot of one of the mounts. They seemed to agree that whatever he did would be wrong.

In the doorway of the storeroom of Hurley, the sutler, three ragged, bearded emigrants were complaining about the price of an axe. "You boys got to remember what it costs to git freight out here," Hurley was heard to say. The soldiers in front of the guard house looked at each other and grinned. They knew that Hurley's stuff came out at government expense. However, they would want liquor and tobacco and this and that, and credit, from Hurley, so it was not for them to spoil his game. Besides, Hurley was part of the army anyway—let the civilians look out for themselves.

The three emigrants came away after a little. One had the axe and was feeling the edge and talking about it. Another had a hand sunk in his side to support the sack of flour on his shoulder. The third had three bottles of whiskey and could be heard expounding that the army sutler had real whiskey, much better than "The rotgut them traders sells."

The man with the axe argued, "I kin git jest as drunk on one as t'other." They went on out the gate.

"Don't you ever lay your rifle aside, Sante Fe?" Colonel Holcomb jestingly asked.

"Yah. I did oncet," Sante Fe snickered. "And the Mexicans took all my furs away from me and stuck me in the calaboose in Sante Fe. I ain't never laid it down since."

"That's all right," grinned Lieutenant David Dunham. "Don't worry. The army will protect you."

"Who? Me?" Sante Fe snorted belligerently, and then stopped to watch a clamor at the gate.

A group of emigrants, with the man Monk in the lead were coming through the gateway. Dusty, ragged, with hairy faces and tobacco-stained beards they were talking excitedly. Only Monk was silent. The men who followed him did not think of themselves as hounding one lone girl to her death—there was something going on, something to talk about, to tell others about with an air of importance. Something was going on, something to break the monotony of the long, long journey and they wanted to see it, to be a part of it and tell about it around the camp fires of the months ahead. Dusty, ragged, unkempt, but their faces alight

with interest, they followed Monk to the group of officers waiting quietly by the flag pole. There they spread out like a fan leaving Monk facing the officers.

Monk's dour eyes fastened on Colonel Holcomb and he demanded, "Who's the leader here?"

"I am in command," Colonel Holcomb assured him. "What can I do for you?"

Monk's thin lips opened over yellow teeth. He spoke complainingly, as if Colonel Holcomb was himself to blame.

"My brother has been murdered," he said.

This was nothing uncommon in that time and place, and the officers were not particularly surprised. They were even mildly amused at Monk's appearance. But Monk's next words sent a little shock through the group so that they stiffened and listened.

"By a girl," Monk went on. "She got away but I demand she be arrested."

"That's too bad," answered Colonel Holcomb. "Where was it? When did it happen?"

"In his wagon, day afore yesterday," Monk whined on, conscious that he had the full attention of his audience. "His wagon was just behind mine. His team stopped and when I went back to see what the matter was, I found him back in the wagon." Monk became dramatic, he shook his fist and half shouted, "He was dead. Hit over the head with something. And that girl done it."

MONK went on with the story, talking sometimes to the half circle of dusty emigrants, sometimes to the little group of well dressed officers.

"This girl came to us at the Missouri River. She wanted to git to Californy, and my brother and his wife let her ride along with them. Then my brother's wife died of the cholery and the girl traveled in the next wagon behind him after that."

"They said that morning they seen her ridin' in the wagon with him."

Monk's voice rose a little in excitement toward the end. After he talked awhile he seemed always to grow a little excited as if he expected opposition and could shout it down.

"But she got away," Monk finished, a little mournfully. "Did she come here?"

"I have not seen her," the Colonel told him, and turned to question the others.

David glanced, instinctively, toward the cabin of the sutler, Hurley, and he saw the girl, standing with her back to the wall, arms spread a little as if her hands were clutching the log walls for support. He forgot the girl of yesterday and was seeing her now for the first time—seeing her and nothing else on earth—seeing a tall, slim girl with wide gray eyes and a mass of soft black hair—a girl with a small, lovely head held high, and her back to the wall.

The Colonel was asking questions and people were looking and in a minute Monk would turn and see her. Monk did turn toward her and his eyes and mouth opened and David wanted to batter out the thin lips with his fists and fix them so they could never open.

"There she is!" Monk shouted, his pointed finger and his voice both shaking vindictively. "There she is. That's the girl that killed him. Arrest her!"

They all turned to look at the girl. The little group of officers and Sante Fe, the ragged emigrants, the soldiers on the bench in front of the guard house, all turned to stare. Over at the blacksmith shop the noise stopped and a heavy man wearing a leather apron came out and stood beside the two soldiers holding horses. The prisoners stopped sweeping and leaned on their long-handled splint brooms. There was a curious ending of all noise and movement, as though all life had ceased to stare at one girl standing alone.

The torn, dark green dress had been neatly mended. The soft black hair was parted over the low, wide forehead and drawn smoothly back in a knot at

the back of the shapely, gallant head.

She stood facing them, her back against the log wall, gazing at them from startled, wide gray eyes. She was very lovely, and very much alone.

THERE she is!" shouted Monk again. "Arrest her. She's the one killed my brother," and he pointed at her with his long dirty finger.

"That's right," one of the emigrants spoke up in an important voice, "She's her."

"What do you know about it?" asked Sante Fe, angrily, and he stepped toward the man with a threatening jut to his jaw.

The man stepped back, saying, defensively, "Well, hit stands to reason, don't it?"

The Colonel started to talk, and Sante Fe turned to listen.

"Well," the Colonel said, and cleared his throat and said, "Well," again. He looked at the girl and then back at Monk. He was clearly averse to doing anything. Then he said, "You must be mistaken, my good man."

"I ain't mistaken," from Monk, "An' I kin prove it."

"That's right," the emigrant with the important voice pushed forward again. "I seen her come acrost the river yestidy."

"Shet yer damn mouth," growled old Sante Fe and he suddenly dropped nine pounds of rifle butt on the man's toes.

The man gave a yowl of pain and leaned on another emigrant while he fingered his toes but no one paid any attention to him.

"Well," said the Colonel, reluctantly, "I suppose I shall have to look into the matter. Lieutenant Dunham," he ordered, "will you ask the young woman to come to the orderly room."

Curious things were going on in Lieutenant Dunham's heart. Squabbles and killings among the emigrants were nothing to him, he told himself. But his heart was a leaden weight as he walked toward the tall slim girl who held her head so high. He felt a swift rush of hatred for Monk and the emigrants. Who were they to point dirty fingers at her?

He smiled in a friendly way, trying to speak casually as if it was all a very trivial matter. He could see that the strained, wild look of yesterday was gone. Now she was waiting for him, calmly, almost indifferently.

"Serene," he said to himself. "Yes, that is the word. Serene."

"Will you come over to the orderly room?" he asked her.

"Have I any choice?" and she smiled a little.

Dunham was looking at the wide gray eyes. He wanted to tell her she had all the choice in the world and he was ready to fight, to fight for whatever she chose—but he knew very well she had no choice.

"I'll go," she said.

Sedately she walked beside him across the parade ground. He was keenly conscious of the tall girl beside him. Her glorious hair came above his own tall shoulder. He noticed she kept step with him, swinging freely along. He thought of other girls, back in the States, mincing along on futile feet. He attempted to reassure her.

"Just a formality," he told her. "It's only this man's word against yours. All you have to do is deny it."

She looked at him out of calm gray eyes.

"But I did kill him," she said.

III

"Them damned Cheyennes!"

THE orderly room was a bare place. One window beside the door, a dirt floor, loopholes in the back looking down onto the flat. Two rough tables and a row of benches around the wall. A wooden bucket of water and a tin dipper on a three-legged stool. A really fine old mahogany arm chair behind one of the ta-

bles—salvage from an emigrant wagon. Rough boxes of records and papers piled beside one of the tables where a Corporal sat writing.

Probably the old mahogany chair had a history—a history of travel over seas in old sailing ships from England, then a gradual drifting westward with the failing fortunes of a family, to be traded at last to sutler Hurley for a little sugar. The deep warm color and suave line of the old chair accentuated the raw bareness of the frontier room.

The Colonel seated himself in the arm chair behind one of the tables. The emigrants came crowding in, looking vacantly around the room. A feeling of formality suddenly oppressed them and stopped their shifting and talking. A man pulled off his hat, others looked at him and then at each other and fumbled with their own hats. Some sat down on the benches, crossing and uncrossing their knees nervously, clearing their throats and astonished at the size and prominence of their hats and hands.

The girl came in, stood a minute, then walked over and sat down on a vacant bench. Lieutenant Dunham and old Sante Fe followed and sat, one on either side of her. Sante Fe's rifle stood upright between his knees as he leaned forward with his hands clasped on the barrel. He stared insolently around the circle of emigrants. When his eyes reached Monk he grunted, "Yah," and spat on the dirt floor.

The Colonel looked pale, with dark patches under his eyes. "Drunk again last night," Dunham commented to himself.

The Colonel cleared his throat and looked at Monk. There was dislike in his eyes.

"You have some accusation against this young woman, have you?" he asked.

"I accuse that woman, Ann Ward, of murdering my brother." His voice came suddenly, exploding as an intolerable racket in the stillness. He went on, telling about it, talking to the whole room as much as to the Colonel, his voice taking on an habitual whine. But under the whine they could hear a deadly persistence. The man would never let go.

He told of the girl coming to the train in Independence, Missouri, saying she wanted to get to California to hunt for her father. Monk's brother and his wife had taken her in their wagon. With an air of being very fair about the matter and conceding every possible good of the girl, he said she had paid for her board and passage. He had the air of being unnecessarily kind to the girl in conceding this. He made it evident that his sense of righteousness compelled him to say all the good about her he could, and went on to tell that she had been very helpful when the cholera struck the wagon train. His brother's wife died of the cholera and they buried her there, down on the Platte.

THE girl apparently was not listening to Monk. Clear eyed, aloof, she sat between the blue uniform of Dunham and the smoke blackened buckskin of old Sante Fe. She was looking away out the window as if Monk were talking of some one in whom she had no interest.

Monk kept on talking. Some of the people shifted restlessly on the benches. The Colonel sat, one elbow on the table, his fingers stroking his side whiskers. Monk said that after his brother's wife died, the girl traveled with the family next in line to his wagon. They said that morning they saw her get into his brother's wagon.

The Colonel interrupted, "These people you mention—the family she traveled with, you have them here with you?"

Monk was annoyed at the interruption to the whining flow of his oration. He stared a minute, then protested, "I did my best to git them to wait but they had to go on with the wagon train. I told them it was their Christian duty to wait," he complained.

"That's all right," spoke up the em-

grant with the important voice, "I seen her coming across the river yestedy."

Sante Fe grunted and moved his rifle and the man hurriedly shifted his sore toes even though they were out of reach. He looked angrily at Sante Fe found that both Dunham and Sante Fe were glaring their dislike and he turned away.

"Anyone else know anything about this?" asked the Colonel.

The emigrants looked at each other expectantly but no one said anything. Sante Fe was glaring truculently around, his fierce old eyes plainly saying, "I dare ye to speak."

Someone nudged the man with the important voice and he lifted his tattered hat from his knees while he crossed his legs the other way and put the hat back. He cleared his throat and said, "Well. You see!"

"See? See what?" in the testy voice of the Colonel.

"Well, I seen her come acrost the river yestedy. She wan't with no wagon. She was afoot," the man said.

Sante Fe snorted. "Yah. I come acrost the river myself yestedy. Twicet. What of it?"

A man snickered and the Colonel looked at him sharply. The man sobered swiftly and looked out the window.

"Is that all you know about it?" asked the Colonel.

"Well," the man offered. "I heard the man tell about it."

The Colonel looked disgusted and in a louder voice asked. "Is that all you know?"

The man said, hurriedly, "Well, yes," and subsided, crestfallen, from what he had expected would be a position of importance in the affair.

The Colonel fidgeted uncomfortably and moved some papers around on the table. He started to say something and stopped and moved the papers back to where they were before. Finally he spoke to the girl.

"Miss Ward," he said in a voice that explained, extenuated, "an accusation has been made and my duty compels me to look into it. Will you not tell me what you can about it?"

The girl looked at the Colonel, then away out the window. The warm blood crept up across her face.

Dunham looked around at the circle of men, all staring at the lonely girl, waiting for her to speak. He hated them. Hated the Colonel, hated the army, hated himself that he was a part of the machine doing this thing.

The girl looked down at the hands clasped in her lap and her face flamed with embarrassment. In a low voice that the men had to listen for, intently, she told her story. She was talking of Monk's brother.

"AT FIRST he wanted me to leave the train—run away with him." The girl's shoulders began to squirm with dislike and disgust as she brought back the picture of Monk's brother.

"Then the cholera came and his wife died. He wanted me to marry him then. I wouldn't."

"Then that morning he asked me to ride a ways with him. He," she hesitated, then went on with a rush, "he attacked me and I hit him with the hammer."

In a dreary, hopeless voice, she said, "I only wanted to get away."

The room was very still after that.

The Colonel moved the papers around again, fingered his whiskers awhile and then spoke in his most authoritative air.

"My orders are clear," he said. "And very explicit. In civil cases of this sort I am compelled to hold the accused and send them to Fort Leavenworth to be turned over to the civil authorities."

He went on, rather gently now. It was plain he regretted what he felt to be his duty. "I must ask Miss Ward to remain here at the post until an escort is going to Leavenworth. I am sure, however, the matter will be easily cleared up."

Lieutenant Dunham was on his feet, "If the Colonel will permit——"

The Colonel spoke sharply, "That

will do, Lieutenant. You have heard my orders."

The Colonel went out at once, swiftly, as if anxious to get away from very disagreeable business.

"Yah," grunted Sante Fe. "Orders! Orders hell!"

Monk and the emigrants crowded out. Relieved of the restraint of the room and the officers, they began volubly discussing the matter as they struggled away toward the gate. Monk was still talking, swinging his arm, protesting indignantly.

Dunham was watching the girl going away toward the Hurley quarters. Sante Fe was leaning on his rifle, staring after the departing emigrants.

"I wonder now," Sante Fe spoke in a meditative voice, as if to himself.

Ma Hurley's door closed behind the slim figure of the girl and Dunham turned to Sante Fe.

"What?" he asked. "What do you wonder?"

Sante Fe still stared after the emigrants, talking softly to himself, "I've killed men in fights and thought nothing about it." After a little the old scout went on. "I wonder, now, how it would seem to jest up and kill a man account I don't like him?"

AS THEY stood there a dusty, ragged, man come through the gate and stopped to look around, uncertainly. Then he saw the blue uniform of Dunham and came toward them. There was a long mule-skinner's whip wound around his neck. His badly worn boots had crumpled half way down to his ankles and the heels were worn off.

"Where's the commanding officer?" he demanded.

"Captain Maxwell, the officer of the day is in here," Dunham told him with a nod of his head toward the door behind him.

"I gotta see the boss," the man insisted. "I got a complaint to make. Them damn Injuns killed a milk-cow of mine."

Sante Fe spat, disgustedly.

Dunham looked at the man and wished there was some way to hush him up and send him about his business. But there was no way. He shrugged as he reflected, "That's what we are here for, I suppose."

To the man he said, "Captain Maxwell will hear your story. He is in there."

Sante Fe and Dunham followed the man inside.

The man stood in front of the table, talking to Maxwell. "Yes sir," he was saying, "I let the cow go fur awhile to kinda git fed up. When I come back looking fur her, I finds them damn Injuns has killed her fur a piece of hide. And I want pay for her."

"Things are getting in a hell of a state," he went on belligerently, "When a man can't turn out a cow fur a few days."

"That's all right," Maxwell assured him in a boastful arrogant voice, "That's just what we are here for. I'll see that you get paid for your cow—or the Indians will wish they had never seen a cow."

Maxwell was obviously pleased that something of the sort had come up. Dunham, contemptuous, could follow his eager interest. It would give him something to do. Give him a chance, as he said, to "Take a crack at the Indians." That would give him publicity, reputation, promotion and all that. Dunham was quite certain Maxwell didn't care a hoot about who was right or wrong in the matter.

Dunham found himself with a growing dislike for the dirty, disheveled emigrant who claimed the cow. He always had disliked Maxwell.

"Tell me about it," Maxwell was saying to the man.

"Well, it was like this," the man started. He seemed to speak with some care, as if he wished to present the case clearly and fairly. Dunham suspected the man was covering up something—or why should his manner be so obvious. He listened to the man.

"It was this way. The cow was footsore so I left her in a patch of grass up the river. After I'd got the wagons up over some rough country I aimed to let the steers rest a day while I came back and got me the cow. When I come back I found the Injuns had killed her. Yes sir, killed her and jest took off a strip o' hide.

"And I aim to git paid fur her," the man stated.

"Of course you are," Maxwell agreed. "I'll see to that," he added, importantly. "What Indians did it? Where are they?"

"It's them damn Cheyennes," the man told him. Thunderhawk's band of Cheyennes. They're camped up the river a piece."

OLD SANTE FE asked casually, "Where's yore wagon?"

The man motioned with his head, "Down on the flat."

"Yah," the old scout snarled. "Ye jest said you took the wagons up a rough piece and left 'em to come back after the cow."

The man turned brick red and blustered. "Well, old man," he blustered, "I couldn't leave 'em up there while I come clear in to the fort here, could I?"

Sante Fe glared at him. "I'm thinking ye turned the cow out to die and then when ye got cold feet and started back east ye found the cow. Now you want to screw something out o' Thunderhawk. Ain't that it?"

"No, it ain't," the man defended, and looked apprehensively at Captain Maxwell.

"That will do, Sante Fe," Maxwell said. "It's the man's cow just the same."

He asked the man. "How much was the cow worth?"

"Well," the man hesitated. "It was sure a good milk cow. I reckon about twenty-five would be about right."

"Hell," exploded Sante Fe. "Twenty-five what?"

"That's enough, Sante Fe," Maxwell spoke sharply. "If you want to talk go outside and talk."

Suddenly Sante Fe leaned over the table, his hat brim flipped straight up over his great beak of a nose. His fierce gray eyes bored into Maxwell.

"For Gawd's sake, Maxwell, take heed what you do. This is Thunderhawk and the Cheyennes."

The old plainsman, veteran of a hundred Indian fights, softened and pleaded. "For Gawd's sake, listen. It will be so easy, right now, to turn the friendly Thunderhawk into a hostile. And when you do—" old Sante Fe paused and his voice lowered and saddened, "and when you do you can ride the trail for a thousand miles by the light of burning wagon trains."

Maxwell looked up at the earnest old man, a little amused, asking, "Afraid of them, Sante Fe?"

"You're damn right I'm afraid," the old scout told him. "I've lived with them, been in their tribal wars, I know them. You're damn right I'm afraid."

Captain Maxwell laughed, "Well, don't worry Sante Fe, we'll take care of you."

Sante Fe turned a sad face to Dunham, making the Indian gesture of hopelessness. He went out then, on swift silent feet and sought Col. Holcomb. To Holcomb he made his plea, recounting the many times Thunderhawk had helped the emigrants, pleading for his friend.

The Colonel consented, finally, that Sante Fe go alone to the Cheyenne encampment and persuade Thunderhawk to come to Laramie for a talk.

AS SANTE FE went out he met the girl, Ann Ward.

Sante Fe stopped and looked at her, staring intently, paying no attention to her friendly, "Hello, Sante." He fingered his chin, thoughtfully.

The predicament of the girl—"Such a grand girl," he told himself, made rage flare in the fierce gray eyes. The girl's friendly smile faded. A little anxiously she asked, "What is it?"

The old plainsman's eyes suddenly softened, he chuckled, asking, " 'Fraid of Indians, be ye?"

The girl laughed in relief, "Why, no," she hesitated a little. Then decidedly, "No. Why should I be?"

Old Sante Fe patted her shoulder. "That's the talk," he told her. "Never be afraid of nothing." He chuckled, adding, "You won't live long but you'll have a grand time."

He looked around, cautiously, to see who, in the crowded confines of Fort Laramie was looking at them. He bent his craggy face to whisper, "Now listen. We're traveling. Tonight. I'll come for you sometime after dark. Be all ready."

The girl looked at him, startled, starting to ask questions, but old Sante Fe's opaque, Indian look instantly masked his face and he walked off toward the gate. She called, "Sante Fe," but he did not even turn, merely shook his head a little and disappeared in the shadow of the double gateway. With heightened pulse and sparkling eyes she turned back to the quarters of the Hurleys.

Sante Fe sought the Indian encampment down on the flat by the river. On the way he met the man, Monk, and stopped to glare at him, asking, "You here yet?"

Monk told him, "I am. And I aim to stay until I see justice done."

Sante Fe grunted, "Justice," spat, and moved on.

After a couple of steps he stopped and called, "Hey, you. Monk." He walked back to Monk, eyeing the long, sober face and the wide mouth with the drooping corners. He stepped up to Monk, his rifle in the crook of his arm, tapping Monk's chest with a long, gnarled forefinger. "Listen, Monk," he said, "jest once I'm warning you. You ain't out in the back lot of your Ioway farm. Not now. Things happen here. Sometimes terrible swift."

"You can't scare me," Monk answered. The quiet tones seemed to convince Sante Fe of their truth. He shrugged, threw out his hand in the hopeless gesture of Indian resignation. "Well," he said. "I've warned ye."

Sante Fe found a small group of Cheyenne tepees, pitched by themselves, in haughty isolation from the other tepees. He talked with a wrinkled old warrior, asking the whereabouts of Thunderhawk's village. The old Indian said the village had left the river the day before, going north, traveling by easy stages to the Powder River country. "The buffalo come no more to the shallow river," he grumbled, "And it is necessary to hunt for them in far places." He went on to say that he, himself would be going the next day and invited his old friend Sante Fe to go with him.

Sante Fe, a bit importantly, said he carried a talk from the soldier chief to Thunderhawk and when one rode for the chiefs one rode fast.

The old Indian was avid with curiosity, but Sante Fe rebuked him, saying, "Who are we to mix in the councils of chiefs?"

Sante Fe's immense hold on the tribes of the northern plains was due, very largely, to his complete absorption, when with them, in their own mental habits.

IT WAS after dark when Sante Fe dropped into the quarters of Lieutenant David Dunham. Had Dunham not been too busy with his dreams he would have noticed something studiously casual in Sante Fe's air.

"Thought I'd say adios, David. I'm riding tonight to have a talk with Thunderhawk. Colonel agreed I go see him before he turns loose that damn Maxwell."

David Dunham looked past the cloud of flies around the candle to ask, "Why tonight, Sante Fe?"

"Cooler in the night," Sante Fe told him.

Dunham's face suddenly brightened and he stood up. "Wait. I'll go with you. I'm sure the colonel will let me. And you know I want to see Thunder-

hawk." Dunham took long strides toward the door, saying, "I'll see the Colonel. Ready in ten minutes."

Sante Fe stood, unmoving, with his back to the closed door. He seemed embarrassed. He shook his head. "Nope. No, David. Not this time." He added, "I can't be bothered."

Dunham grinned, "What do you mean—bothered?"

Sante Fe chuckled, looking affectionately at the soldier, but shaking his head so that long, grizzled hair swept across his shoulder. "I'll tell ye about it sometime—but tonight I jest plain don't want ye."

Dunham stared at him, a little blankly, then laughed, "O ho—there must be a woman in the case."

Sante Fe grinned. "Well, what would you expect—fine looking man like me?" and slipped out to avoid any more embarrassing questions. He stood just outside the door to see if he would be followed and to look intently around the shadowy row of quarters that surrounded the little parade ground, listening to the various, subdued noises of the army post in the early night. Nothing unusual was going on. He thought of the guard in the gateway, and shook his head, dubiously. Well, that was a risk that had to be faced. He cast a practiced glance up at the stars and sought the quarters of the Hurleys.

IV

... *Like a waiting gallows.*

HALF an hour later, walking in swift silence, head on shoulder, Sante Fe was asking the sentry to open the gate. Ann Ward was with him.

The sentry in the gateway looked uncertainly at the girl. He told himself he certainly had no orders regarding her. He stood aside and let them pass. He hoped she was getting away with good old Sante Fe. For a moment he wanted to speak, tell her goodbye, but concluded he'd better not even see her. He told himself again he had no orders concerning her. He felt very cheerful over that conclusion.

The girl put her hand through Sante Fe's arm, stumbling a little in the dark. Ma Hurley had given her a shawl. The shawl covered her head and shoulders. She held it together in front with her free hand, glancing fearfully back and tugging at Sante Fe's arm, urging him to hurry. The spirit of flight possessed her, every vagrant noise was an alarm and shadows were men who would stop her. They went along under the wall to the corner and then out into the starlight toward the corrals.

The corral gateway loomed above them—two upright posts and a cross-piece on top, high in the air. A rope was dangling from the cross-piece. The posts and the cross-piece with dangling rope loomed in the shadows like a waiting gallows.

The girl halted, dragging at Sante Fe's arm and gasped "Oh!"

The old man was insensible to her premonitions. To him it was nothing but a corral gate where one drove horses in and out. To her it symbolized her whole situation—a waiting gallows.

" 'Tain't fur now," Sante Fe whispered reassuringly and led around the outside of the corral. Two saddled horses were tied there.

Sante Fe helped her up into the saddle and handed the reins up, "Jest let your pony follow mine," he admonished. "He's plumb gentle and he'll follow right along. It'll be a long ride, so take it easy." She wrapped the shawl around her more securely and tied two corners at her waist.

The saddle creaked as Sante Fe climbed up onto his horse, settled himself in the stirrups and with a muttered word started off west, into the darkness. The girl's pony followed. She could see the man and horse ahead of her as a moving blackness, darker than the ground. Sometimes she caught the glint of starlight from the rifle barrel

resting across Sante Fe's saddle, or heard the faint rustle of the fringe on his buckskin shirt.

The girl soon found that her pony traveled best if she let the reins lie loose and left him to his own desire. She pulled the shawl more closely about her shoulders and shivered a little as the chill night air searched her out. She clasped her hands on the saddle horn and gave herself up to her thoughts.

They rode at a walk up a long slope, the sounds from the Indian camp and the trading posts following them fitfully. They crossed a ridge, dipping down a steep gravelly slope and the noises from behind were cut off as though a door had closed.

The girl found herself thinking again of the corral gate and the dangling rope, like a gallows where they hung people by the neck until they were dead. She cringed and wondered if it hurt to be hung. She stirred in the saddle, impatiently, trying by physical effort to shake off her morbidness.

Her thoughts slipped away to the tall lieutenant they had left at the fort. David Dunham. David Dunham. Lieutenant David Dunham. She repeated the name over and over to herself to the soft drumming of her pony's feet. In her thoughts she could see him clearly, standing so tall and straight, the sunlight making shadows on the lean, dark face. She began dreaming of seeing him again. She knew she would see him again. She found herself blushing in the night, as she became conscious of still more intimate thoughts about the tall soldier. She wanted to talk to Sante Fe about him, get Sante Fe to tell all he knew about him.

SHE was startled to find that her pony had stopped with his nose close to the flank of Sante Fe's horse. Sante Fe was slouched around in the saddle, leaning back with a hand on the horse's rump, intently listening.

"Ssh," he hissed. "Somebody's follerin' us."

After a while her untrained ears picked up the sound of a horse, apparently being urged to a trot over the rocky ground.

Saddle leather creaked, a horse nickered, and a black shadow came suddenly out of the night.

The newcomer pulled his horse to a stop and sat there a minute, saying nothing. Old Sante Fe had pulled his pony half around and sat with outstretched head peering at the shadow.

The shadow spoke with the voice of Monk, "I seen you git the horses up this evening and I kept watch. It hain't no use," he said in his sour voice, "I ain't going to let her git away."

The girl shrank back and waited for the angry outburst she expected to hear from Sante Fe.

There was no outburst. Instead, the old scout sat a long time peering steadily back at Monk. He stirred a little in the saddle, looked up at the stars, then sighed, as if something had gone from him.

He spoke quietly, almost gently, but there was ruthless finality in his tones.

"Monk," he said, "I'm going to ride ahead a few steps. If ye follow me—I'll kill ye!"

Sante Fe still sat there, immobile, for a long time. Then there was the menacing double, "Click, click," as he pulled the heavy hammer of his rifle to full cock. Then he slowly turned his pony's head, rode a half dozen paces, stopped and waited.

The girl, appalled at what was coming, suddenly yanked her pony back. She tried to scream, to protest. She was in a nightmare of horror, gnawing her clenched fingers and unable to make a sound. From a tremendous distance she heard Monk muttering, "Into Thy hands, Oh Lord." She tried to scream and her voice stuck in her throat—only a hoarse, meaningless croak coming. She heard Monk kick his horse into a walk. He passed her and rode steadily up to Sante Fe.

Old Sante Fe still sat there, waiting, waiting, until it seemed that ages and

ages were passing. After a long time, very carefully, he let the rifle hammer down onto the capped nipple. Then he picked up his reins and stirred restlessly in the saddle. He shook his head and sighed, regretfully. "You're a braver man than I be."

He spoke to the girl, over his shoulder, ignoring Monk, "Come on, Ann, we must travel along."

In the reaction all the girl's strength left her and she thought for a minute she would faint. Then she found her pony plodding along after Sante Fe as if nothing had happened.

They rode on through the night, Sante Fe ahead, then the girl with Monk following. The stars drifted across the sky and sank and new ones rose in the east. They crossed the river, stopping for the ponies to stick their noses down among the stars dancing in the river. In the cool damp air of the river bottom the smell of the sage came up, clean and sweet. Up strange, wild gorges they went, through groups of stunted, twisted pines and over hills where the loose stones rattled away from the uncertain feet of their ponies.

Once Sante Fe's horse stopped suddenly, snorted, then made an effort to whirl and run back. Sante Fe cursed impatiently and brought him under control, muttering, half to himself, half to Ann, "Bear smell, I reckon."

ANN WARD began to realize that dawn was coming. In the dark she had been riding in a dream world, completely oblivious to her surroundings. Now, surprised, she realized she could see the white ribbon of the buffalo trail they were following up a little valley. The narrow, deeply worn path unrolled like a ribbon from under Sante Fe's horse. It reminded her of the cow paths in the pasture of the farm of her grandfather in Vermont. For a little while she had the feeling they would soon come to bars and the barn beyond. Now she could make out the black pines on the hillside, no longer a black mass but individual trees that stood there watching them silently as they rode by. They seemed alive, as animals are alive, thinking and watching as they stood there so dark and sullen.

Over the hill to the right the sky was flushed with yellow light with one great star shining in the midst. Birds were twittering. The ghostly shape of a wolf stopped an instant and looked back at them over a gray shoulder, then slipped silently away through the sage. The wolf stopped again, behind a sage bush, and the girl kept her eyes fastened on him. They came nearer and nearer and the girl wondered if the wolf was going to stand there beside the trail until they passed. When she came up she saw it was not the wolf but a long gray stone her eyes had fastened on. This disturbed and worried her. She had so certainly seen the wolf stop behind the bush—and then it was only a stone. Perhaps it would be like that in all of life.

On the summit of the hill the morning rushed up to meet them. Down under the hill it had been the half light of neither night nor day. Now, suddenly, it was morning. Away off to the east a great conflagration was just under the horizon. Great flames of light shot upward. The girl found herself trying consciously to listen to the miracle of the sunrise.

They rode through a grove of low pine trees, bending below the drooping branches or putting them aside with hands that became sticky with rosin and smelled sweetly. After the pines they rode out onto the shoulder of a hill and Sante Fe pulled his horse to a stop. Below them, in a great open basin in the hills they saw the brown tepees of Thunderhawk's Cheyennes.

A FRINGE of willows marked the stream that came down through the basin. At the upper end of the basin, in black gashes in the hills, groves of aspen flung their sweet green leaves to the morning sun. The white

bodies of the graceful trees shone through the delicate drapery of the light green leaves. Above the aspens was a black band of pines. The twinkling aspens rested among the pines like a gay smile under brooding brows. Above the pines slivers of savagely naked rock thrust upward.

On a wide flat beyond the stream the Indian tepees stood in a great circle. The tepee poles sticking out fanwise above the brown buffalo-hide lodge-covers looked black against the brown grass and gray sage.

The village was awake and the business of living going on. Columns of soft gray smoke rose lazily straight upward, then drifted slowly westward and hung in a thin band along the hillside. A herd of ponies was coming in from beyond the village, young boys riding bareback behind. One of the boys was chanting the herder's song. The voice was fresh and young but plaintive, saddening.

Women were going to the stream and carrying away pots of water or standing in the willows to gossip with their friends. A young girl threw back her head and laughed a gay laugh that came up clearly to Ann Ward. Ann found herself smiling in sympathy, then sobered to think, "There is nothing in all the world to laugh at."

Warriors came out of tepees, looked approvingly at the blazing east, and examined the night ponies picketed before their lodges. Some stretched themselves in the early light, their robes slipping down off naked shoulders to be shrugged back into place as they called a morning greeting to neighbors. One gray-haired old warrior seated himself beside his tepee in the grateful warmth of the newly risen sun and filled a long, gaily decorated pipe. An old woman come out of the tepee, smoke trailing from the end of a stick which he held to light the pipe. The old warrior very reverently blew little puffs of smoke to the four quarters of the earth to propitiate the gods.

Men were pointing up at the figures on the hill and talking to each other. A group of blanketed warriors gathered, shading their eyes with level hands and watching them. Sante Fe threw up his hand and yelled a shrill greeting. The warriors answered. Children scuttled about, pointing up at them, and talking in shrill tones. Men and women came out of tepees to look at the hills, shading their eyes with their hands. The Indians' dogs set up a sudden, discordant clamor that died as quickly as it had started. Sante Fe kicked his pony with a moccasined heel and started down the slope. Ann's horse picked his way after him. She could hear the stumbling gait of Monk's horse behind her.

As they rode into the great tribal circle people were coming out to stand and look at them. Warriors threw up their hands in greeting, shouting to Sante Fe their delight that he was home again. Sante Fe was boyishly happy, laughing, waving his hand, calling out to old friends.

One wrinkled old warrior, grinning, and talking to Sante Fe, "What did he say?" Ann asked.

Old Sante Fe laughed, looking at her out of impish eyes. "That's old Plenty Coups," he told her, "And he says old Sante Fe has got him a white woman."

Ann Ward laughed, delighted.

THE great Chief, Thunderhawk, was waiting for them in front of his lodge. Ann Ward sat her horse, wide eyed, looking at the man Sante Fe was greeting. She saw a man over six feet, naked from the waist up, the great chest with the scars of the sun dance, wide burnished copper arm bands on the upper arms, a high, slanting forehead, a thin aquiline nose and a wide, firm mouth. The long hair was plaited in with strips of red cloth, a braid hanging down in front of each shoulder. As Ann looked at the great chief she felt, suddenly, subdued, insignificant, as though she had come into the presence of majesty.

Beside the Cheyenne chief was a young lad of twelve, Young Thunderhawk. Young Thunderhawk was dressed in all the beaded buckskin, feathers and silver ornaments that became the only son of a wealthy and important chief.

The Indian and Sante Fe were shaking hands, smiling at each other, holding their hands a long time, looking at each other affectionately.

A stout woman with a broad, good humored face, Thunderhawk's wife, came out of the tepee carrying a chubby baby girl astride her hip. She screamed her delight at the sight of Sante Fe. She looked at Ann Ward, laughed, and made a remark to Sante Fe.

Sante Fe snickered, telling Ann, "They're jest naturally determined you're my woman."

Ann Ward held her arms down to the chubby baby girl. The little girl looked up at the white woman a long time with big, wondering black eyes, then she smiled and held up her arms to be taken. The baby's mother, astonished and excited, lifted her up and Ann Ward placed her in the saddle in front. The Indian baby made noises to make the horse go, looked up at Ann, questioningly, then gurgled with glee.

Sante Fe exclaimed, "Yah, Ann, you're right home already. You'll like these people. They like you." He turned to Thunderhawk to talk in Cheyenne. The Indian motioned to his tepee but Sante Fe argued a little and Ann heard the words "Plenty Coups." The chief nodded his head in assent.

Sante Fe led the horses along the circle of buffalo hide tepees and came to one where a very old man and woman were standing, waiting. They greeted him warmly, patting him all over with loving hands.

The old scout turned to Ann, telling her to dismount, leading her up to old Plenty Coups and his old wife. "I'm leaving you here," he told her. "You'll like these people. And they'll like you.

"Now I got to go and hold council with the chiefs. I'll see you again afore I start back."

Sante Fe walked off, leaving Ann Ward standing there looking, a little appalled, at the two very old Indians who were soberly studying her. The old woman came and put an arm around the white girl and Ann Ward was trying to suppress a sob. The ancient warrior held back the entrance flap and the old woman of the Cheyenne and the homeless white girl passed in.

LATER in the day the important men of the tribe were sitting, cross legged in a circle, in council. Sante Fe had spent most of the day talking with Thunderhawk and then with many of the lesser chiefs so when the council gathered it was well known what was to be discussed. It was considered an extremely grave matter.

The pipe had passed and repassed and various warriors had spoken briefly on tribal matters, soon dismissed.

At last old Plenty Coups broached the matter that was troubling all the older warriors. He spoke of the sick cow of the emigrant and the demand of Colonel Holcomb that an outrageous price be paid or he himself be surrendered to the troops.

They discussed the matter. It seemed rather petty to them—one sick cow. As in the case of Thunderhawk himself, most of the warriors were willing to pay a reasonable price. None of them, however, could see any reason why they should submit to injustice. And as to surrendering old Plenty Coups—that was the idle jabber of children.

Old Plenty Coups spoke with amused contempt, "The white soldiers," he said, "make a big fuss over a sick cow that has been thrown away. Let them consider our buffalo that they kill merely for the tongues. And there are many sick cows thrown away by the whites along their trail. Let the man who says he has been wronged choose an-

other of the sick cows and go his way."

"It is true," the others nodded their heads and looked at Sante Fe for advice. Surely, that was the solution. There were sick cows all along the trail. Let the man choose one for himself and go in peace.

Sante Fe shook his head and grumbled, "It is not that," he told them in Cheyenne. "The man thinks he will get something for nothing. He is a thief and liar and his father was a coyote."

They thought that over. Yes, it was clear the man had the heart of a coyote.

Plenty Coups asked Sante Fe what would be done with him if he gave himself up.

"Na! Na!" the other warriors exclaimed and shook their heads in indignation at the suggestion. But they looked at Sante Fe to hear his reply.

The old plainsman threw out his hands in expostulation, "They would put him in the strong house," he said. "In the strong house with the little window."

One of the men began telling about the strong house. He had looked in it on one of his visits to the fort. A soldier had shown him where they kept bad people.

"It is very strong," the warrior said. "Built of heavy logs that no man may break out of. And there is no sunlight. No sunlight, only a little hole, high up, so big," and his robe slid off his bronze shoulders as he put his hands up to show a window too small for a man to crawl through.

"It is very dark in there," the warrior went on, lowering his voice as when one talks of evil things. "Very dark, and no one to talk with."

The warriors considered this. They pictured fine old Plenty Coups shut away in the dark with no one to talk with. In the dark all day, every day, perhaps always. How could they tell? He might die in that place.

A ring of young men outside the circle of older warriors were whispering together angrily but stopped to listen as old Plenty Coups asked again, "And if the Cheyennes do not submit to injustice? Then what?"

Sante Fe shrugged. "The white chief at the fort says he will send the soldiers on the war trail."

THE warriors were quiet for awhile, turning the matter over in their minds, and hoping that the great Thunderhawk would now speak his mind. They looked to him for guidance.

Sante Fe let his glance sweep around the circle of haughty, aquiline faces. He could read disgust and anger in the dark eyes. He wished he had not used so strong a word as "war trail." The old fool of a Colonel didn't want war—he thought he had merely to send out and arrest old Plenty Coups if he wanted to.

The Colonel was crazy. These people would never submit. It would be "war trail." They would fight. Fight until they died. Why couldn't the damn emigrants stay in their own country? This was Indian country, always had been and the government had promised over and over again that the Indians were not to be disturbed. Why, the old plainsman mournfully thought, the big treaty of only three years ago that was to settle everything had already been broken by the whites. Broken many times. Bad times were coming. Bad times, old Sante Fe told himself, and he was getting old and wanted to dwell in peace and quiet.

Thunderhawk rose to his feet, throwing his buffalo robe up over his massive shoulders. The warriors settled themselves, hoping he would make one of his famous, impassioned speeches. But there was an air of dismissal, of finality about the chief as he stood up in the sunlight, the eagle feather slanting forward across his stately head.

They knew he would speak now, speak finally and decisively. The young men on the outskirts of the circle stopped their whispering and turned eager, intent faces up to the chief.

"Why talk?" asked Thunderhawk in

his deep voice. "Is it for the white chief to tell the Cheyenne to come and to go? Is it for the white chief to tell the Cheyenne to send this man or that man to be shut away in the dark?" He made a gesture of contempt that such a question should even be asked. "The Cheyennes are a free people," he concluded, wrapped his robe around himself and strode off. The matter was settled.

ONE of the young warriors sprang up in the air with a yell of delight and bounded away, the others leaping after him in an excited clamor of pleased talk.

Old Plenty Coups shook his head in troubled sorrow. "The evil days are upon us," he said.

The troubled spirits of the older men were not shared by the young warriors. They were delighted at Thunderhawk's decision. A group of them, young warriors of the Bowstrings, a secret fighting fraternity, went up the slope and sat in a close group in the shade of the pines. They could be seen talking and laughing delightedly. They were frankly pleased at the possibility of war with the white soldiers.

In the cool of the evening Sante Fe came to Plenty Coups' tepee to say goodbye.

"Why, Sante Fe," Ann protested, "you rode all last night."

"Yeah," he answered, glumly, "and talked all day. But I gotta get back to Laramie. Hell's going to pop if I don't get busy. You all right now, girl?"

Ann said, "Oh, I am. I like these people. Only," she laughed, "I wish I could talk to them and know what they say."

"Ain't no need," Sante Fe told her. "You'll find words ain't necessary soon's you get used to it."

The old plainsman took her hand in both of his and patted it and smiled at her. She felt an immense affection for the old man.

"Now don't ye worry about nothing," Sante Fe went on. "You're as safe here as a baby in its cradle and everything'll come out all right. I'll be back quick as I kin."

He turned to his horse, then stopped and spoke again, "Mebbeso it'll seem more homelike if ye know old Plenty Coups is used to having white folks in his lodge. They had two sons oncet—fine lads they was—killed in the wars years ago," the old man sighed a little over his memories, then went on, "Then they 'dopted my old pardner, Asa Dunham, and he lived with 'em, off and on, fur years. He found a woman in an emigrant train and went off to Oregon. Asa is a uncle to that Lieutenant Dunham at the fort. So ye see ye are among old friends."

He came back and shook hands again, then swung up onto the horse and rode away. Ann saw him pull up his horse and stare down at the figure of Monk. She wondered a little that the voice she had thought so kind and gentle could sound so cold and hard as he talked to Monk.

"I'm headed for the fort, and you'd better git yer pony and come along if you know what's good for you."

Monk shook his head. "It's my duty to stay here and see that justice is done," he said.

"Duty hell!" growled Sante Fe. "These Injuns'll slit yer throat."

Monk made a motion with his hands as though that was of no importance. "I am in my Lord's hands," he droned.

Sante Fe spat as he kicked his horse with moccasined feet, "Yah," he grunted, "and I hope He rots yer damn teeth out."

Sante Fe stopped at the tepee of Thunderhawk and talked earnestly for a few minutes, partly with words and partly with swift moving hands, pointing to Monk and to Ann, south to Fort Laramie and up at the sky several times. At the end he said, "I leave my daughter in your hands, O Thunderhawk."

The chief bowed gravely. "She is with her own people."

V

"It's time to teach these Cheyennes a lesson."

VERY slowly Ann Ward was picking up the pieces of her broken life and putting them together again. She was helped by her growing interest in the life of the Indians and a sincere affection for old Plenty Coups and his wife.

Her easy acceptance of life among the Indians astonished her a little at first. On the long trip across the plains she had quite readily absorbed the attitude of fear and hatred held by the emigrants. What she saw now was totally different from her preconceived ideas. She found a people of simple friendliness toward herself and of unselfish generosity toward each other. If there was food to be had, they all ate—if there was none they all hungered together. Their almost idolatrous love for their children seemed beautiful to her. Their ceremonious courtesy and the barbaric splendor of their wild pageantry touched a cord in her that throbbed in quick response. Her wracking experience with the emigrants and at the fort seemed a bitter business in comparison with her life now.

Then there came a day when, very early in the morning, an old man rode about the village shouting in a loud voice. Old Plenty Coups' wife at once became very busy, motioning to Ann to help her and laughing at her blank look. Ann soon discovered they were packing up—the Cheyenne village was on the move.

The tepees began coming down, horses were driven in, caught and saddled. The women were busy arranging their effects in bundles and packing them on the horses. Much of the stuff was onto the tepee poles dragging behind the better-broken animals. On these travois an aged woman, or a basket of puppies or a young child found a secure place to travel. Some of the little girls had rigged a miniature travois for a favorite dog and loaded them with their play lodges or a mother dog found herself dragging the travois that carried her own whimpering puppies. Once Ann laughed aloud as a very solemn little girl went past with a small papoose board on her back and the wildly astonished face of a puppy sticking out from under the hood.

The warriors were mounted and moved out, some in advance of the village, some on the sides, and a strong rear guard. The calls and laughter of the women, shrill cries of the children, the confusion of the hurrying ponies, the bright moving streamers and feathers and the sun glinting on polished lance heads made a gorgeous spectacle of riotous life and color as the marching village poured down through the valley to the east.

In the late afternoon they came down out of the hills to the edge of the limitless plains. Some of the older men of the advance guard were sitting in a circle on the ground and the tepees were soon going up around them. In a very little time everything was in its usual place and Ann, somewhat surprised, found that she had the same neighbors and knew her way around the village as well as though they had not moved.

The days passed swiftly. Ann was busy helping the wife of old Plenty Coups or at the tepee of Thunderhawk. There was wood to be gathered, buffalo, elk and deer skins to be scraped and tanned and worked. Almost without conscious thought she dropped into the wild life of the Cheyenne as a daughter of Plenty Coups.

AT NIGHT, under her buffalo robe, with a faint hissing from the dying fire, she would stare up through the dusky gloom of the tepee to the stars swinging across the smoke hole. She found a comforting pleasure in the thought that the uncle of David Dunham had lived in this same place, looking up at the stars as she was doing. It seemed to bring David closer.

Plenty Coups' night horse, picketed in front of the tepee, snuffled at the bare ground only a few feet from her head. The unshod hoofs made a padding sound as he moved about. The wild, eerie cry of a coyote came up out of the plains and the village dogs broke into a sudden yapping clamor.

As Ann lay there, listening to the night sounds, she could clearly see the fort and the soldiers, old Sante Fe, and the tall figure of Lieutenant Dunham striding across the little parade ground, the yellow stripes on his long legs flashing in the sun. In her thoughts she could clearly see old Sante Fe's craggy face, the fierce gray eyes, and long hair hanging down on fringed buckskin shoulders. But when she tried to draw the lean, dark face of David Dunham close to her he escaped. She wondered why she could see old Sante Fe so clearly but try as she would she could not visualize David's face. Lying with her hands clasped under her small head, she gave her mind up to trying to see David's face but always it eluded her. She could see Captain Maxwell, and flushed in the dark and stirred uneasily. The beast, she thought, he stripped her clothes off when he looked at her.

Drowsing off, the face of Col. Holcomb came to her and she awoke to giggle a little as she thought the colonel's sideburns made him look like a rabbit. She was glad David was clean shaven, even if everybody else did wear a beard. Again she tried to bring David's face out of the night but it escaped her. She could see him so clearly, standing straight and tall but when he turned his face to look at her she could not see it. Troubled she thought again of the wolf in the dawn—the wolf that slunk away through the sage and then stopped behind a bush, looking back at them over its shoulder, and then when she came up it was not the wolf at all, only a gray rock. She sighed a little, wondering—probably life was like that—things stood out so clearly just ahead, then, when you got there, they were gone or had changed.

ANN'S shoes went all to pieces and were replaced with moccasins of deerskin, brightly beaded and reaching nearly to her knees. Her one dress became worn and torn past all mending. The old woman gave her a dress of doeskin and she was enchanted with it. It hung loosely from the shoulders to a little below the knees and was gathered in at her slim waist with a bead embroidered doeskin sash. The dress had wide, short open sleeves that hung like a little cape. Her round white arms turned red and then tanned a soft golden brown. She often fingered the doeskin, wondering at its softness. It was like velvet. She liked the faint odor of wood smoke that clung to the garment. With a rush of sympathy for the old woman she thought of the long days of patient work that had gone into the beadwork and the ornate design of colored quills down the front.

She began doing her hair in the manner of the Indian women. Two thick, silken braids of black hanging down in front of her shoulders. She braided in bits of red worsted. One day she let the old woman draw a line of vermilion paint down the part of her hair and rub two vermilion spots on her cheeks, high up on the cheekbones. Looking in the little mirror hanging from a tepee pole, she wished that David Dunham could see her. What would he think? She wondered if he would like the brown tan of her face and arms. With a little regret she thought of the white, carefully shaded skins of the girls back in the states. Well, all that, she told herself, was over and done with.

Two hawk faced young warriors, The Flying Cloud and The Wild Horse came often to the tepee in the evening, sitting cross-legged by the fire, smoking with old Plenty Coups, talking a little in soft musical gutturals that Ann did not understand. She liked to see them there, the flickering light of the fire playing over their bronze faces and bringing out the eager, aquiline fea-

tures. Back of them the firelight cast grotesque, enormous shadows on the lodge cover. They never spoke to her, or seemed to look at her and she often felt as if she were at a play as she watched the hawklike faces across the footlight of the little fire in the sunken hole in the center of the tepee.

One day The Flying Cloud came to the tepee, let a fat buck slip from his shoulders to the ground and walked swiftly away. The old woman laughed, looked at her in a knowing way and patted her shoulder approvingly. Suddenly it flashed on Ann's understanding that The Flying Cloud was a suitor. At first she laughed, delightedly, and wondered what David would think of that. There was a certain feminine satisfaction that she should be desired by The Flying Cloud. She understood his high standing in the tribe. But how utterly absurd—and she laughed again.

The old woman seemed to read her thoughts and shook her head in a way that very plainly said, "He's a great warrior. He'll be a chief. You couldn't do better." Ann thought of David and laughed again.

ALWAYS, in the background of Ann's life stalked the black figure of Monk. The morning after Sante Fe left, Monk had come to Plenty Coups' tepee and stood in the entrance, shutting off the sunlight, glowering down at her. Old Plenty Coups got to his feet and put both hands on Monk's chest, giving him an angry shove and motioning to him to go away.

As Monk stumbled back, Ann saw the slim figure of the Son of Thunderhawk beside him. With incredible swiftness the young Indian produced a bow and drew the feathered shaft of the arrow back to his shoulder. For an instant the wild glare of the fear of sudden death sat in Monk's eyes, then he turned and walked hurriedly away, glancing back, fearfully, over his shoulder. It had happened so suddenly. Out of the drowsy peacefulness of the summer morning sudden death had leered for an instant. Then Monk had gone off in a half run.

Plenty Coups and the Son of Thunderhawk spoke to each other and then both laughed. The young Indian made a reassuring gesture to Ann and sauntered idly away as though nothing had happened. Even yet Ann could see the sudden leap of the muscles in the naked shoulder of the Son of Thunderhawk as he drew the arrow back.

The incident left her weak and very much disturbed. The Indians were so friendly, peaceful and apparently happy, yet—without an instant's warning this other thing had flared so quickly. She proceeded to carefully forget the incident. Murder and sudden death could not be a part of this friendly existence. Probably the Son of Thunderhawk had been fooling—but she had seen his eyes and she knew quite well it was a serious matter. Well, anyway, Monk would not be allowed to bother her here.

Two or three times, when he felt himself relieved of surveillance Monk approached her and attempted to speak, but always an Indian appeared out of nowhere to step between and motion him away. He soon gave up trying to speak to her.

SANTE FE had said he would come back as soon as he could. Always Ann watched the south for a sight of him, hoping always a tall figure in blue would be with the old scout. She told herself she didn't know he would come and she must not expect it—trying to build up a defense against disappointment.

Why should he come? But she knew —and hugged it to her heart, that some day he would come riding through the sunshine. She dreamed of what would happen then and after delicious hours of these dreams would become very matter of fact and tell herself nothing would happen. Then she would think of the wolf and become very much depressed—the wolf that waited for her and then wasn't there—and it was the

same with her father. Perhaps all of life was like that.

She wondered if he would know her at first, dressed as she was in the creamy doeskin and her face tanned so brown. She was sorry about the tan. She wished she could have kept her skin white as a lady should. But perhaps he would understand. Her mother had often told her a man never understood anything. But he was not like other men. She was sorry her stockings were all worn out. The moccasins came to her knees but, somehow, it seemed immodest not to wear stockings, even if no one did know.

And then when the great day came it was not at all as she had dreamed it. She was standing just outside the tepee, working busily with the wife of Plenty Coups, scraping a fresh buffalo hide. They had chisel-like scrapers of elk horn and would firmly press these down the flesh side of the skin, one chisel following the other. A thin stream of reddish wet came out in front of the scrapers to be carried down and off the edge of the skin. Ann suddenly stopped and looked up and David Dunham stood there looking at her.

Ah, the dear lad, she thought, how tall and straight and strong he is—a soldier and a leader of men. He was looking at her, very gravely and searchingly, holding her hand and not letting it go. He was telling her that Colonel Holcomb had sent him with Sante Fe to make a last, formal demand on the Indians.

Vaguely she began to feel a sickening sense of disappointment—she had waited so long for this tall soldier to take her hungrily in his arms—and he merely stood there, gravely, shyly, asking silly childish questions, "Was she all right? Was she comfortable? Did she have enough to eat?" Dear God, what did those matter? Couldn't he know that his love was the only thing in life worth while? And she was smiling and laughing quite gaily, answering his banal questions, "Oh yes, and yes, and of course." Dear God, was everything in life to be like that wolf, looking at her over its shoulder, waiting for her—and then not be there? Was all life like that?

And then Sante Fe strolling up to greet her, his rifle cradled in his arm like a baby. Then they were walking off, going away from her.

THE council of warriors were gathered in a circle in the cool of the evening. Lieutenant David Dunham was sitting, cross-legged, between Thunderhawk and Sante Fe. The Son of Thunderhawk was sitting directly behind his father, a group of the younger men around him. Coming as a formal envoy David had, at the suggestion of Sante Fe, worn the long coat of his dress uniform with the gilt sword belt and the dangling yellow tassels. His sword lay across his knees and his elbows on the sword as he waited, trying to imitate the impassive patience of the Indians. He ought to be thinking of what he would say to them instead of dreaming of the girl.

He could see her now as he looked across the circle and between two gray haired old warriors. She was sitting with a group of girls, the little daughter of Thunderhawk leaning against her shoulder. How he had wanted to take her in his arms—wanted to walk right up to her and take her in his arms, and dared not. He was afraid he would startle her, perhaps lose her. He must wait, be patient. How could he be patient when he so wanted that splendid woman? He'd better be thinking of what he was to say to the Indians.

But there was nothing much he could say. They would question him, and there was only Colonel Holcomb's ultimatum to give them. Damn Colonel Holcomb!

Perhaps no one would mention Colonel Holcomb's demand for the surrender of Old Plenty Coups. David concluded he wouldn't bring it up—yet. Plenty of time. His orders were to see if he could arrange the matter peaceably. There had been a bitter argu-

ment at the fort between him and Captain Maxwell over the matter. Maxwell had wanted immediate and drastic action, and recalled Colonel Holcomb's promise that if an expedition was necessary he could command. Maxwell seemed to think that here was an opportunity to exhibit himself, perhaps get his name in the Eastern papers and make a reputation for himself as a conqueror of hostile Indians and protector of the poor emigrants. Eastern papers were beginning to be full of emigrant complaints about the Indians. But they were not hostile Indians—and would not be if they were not kicked into it. Damn the emigrants!

It had taken a lot of talk before Colonel Holcomb finally gave a testy consent to let David take Sante Fe, go to Thunderhawk and see what he could do.

"What the hell can you do?" Maxwell had blustered. "Either they will or they won't. They've had time enough. Now it's time to teach these Cheyennes a lesson."

It was true enough. What could he do? He could not honestly advise them either to pay an exorbitant and unjust price for the cow, nor give up Plenty Coups. They were perfectly right in their refusal. Why couldn't the Colonel see it? Damn the emigrants, David thought. His sympathy was entirely with the Indians.

David wondered a little as to how much his desire to come to the Cheyenne village was hope of doing something—and how much was desire to see the girl. He had been ordered to deliver an ultimatum and would have to do it, but there was nothing to be gained by hurrying. He would merely discuss things this evening. Then tomorrow there would be another council and he could tell them then. Or he might stave it off several days—the Colonel surely would make no move until he returned. There was everything to gain by delay. Delay long enough and the whole thing might blow over. And the longer he delayed, the more he would see of the girl. Duty and desire seemed to ride together. And as he came to that conclusion he found himself wondering uneasily if the Colonel would wait. But surely he would.

LATE the second evening Sante Fe and Lieutenant Dunham left the Cheyenne village and were riding back through the hills to Fort Laramie. Sante Fe had said they could go back by either of two routes—around the base of the hills on the open plains or straight through the broken hill country. It was nearer through the hills. All his life David regretted he did not choose, this once, the longer way round. He might have stood between Maxwell and his dreadful end—might, for a time, have staved off a war that lasted thirty years, cost hundreds of lives and brought a fine people to ruin and degradation.

The Indians had made it quite clear they would not give up old Plenty Coups. Well, why should they? They were right—that was what was wrong with the whole business. And Colonel Holcomb, egged on by the emigrants and the Eastern papers would try to take him—and that meant war. What would happen to the girl in that case?

When he thought of the girl, he felt defrauded, lost. In his dreams he had ridden into the Cheyenne village, walked up to the girl and taken her in his arms. So many times he dreamed of that dear bright head on his shoulder and the sweet gray eyes looking up at him. And when the time came he had just stood there looking at her, talking of nothing and finding even that hard to say.

It was the middle of the forenoon when Sante Fe and David splashed through the river and cantered up the slope to old Fort Laramie. They rode on out to the corral, the corral with the high gate posts and the beam across the top. Ann had told David it made her think of a place to hang people and he had laughed at her. The stable sergeant came to take their horses.

"Too bad you weren't here yesterday, Lieutenant," the sergeant said. He was full of his news—seemed to think the Lieutenant would regret his lost opportunity.

"So?" asked David. "Why?" swinging down from his horse and handing the reins to the sergeant.

The sergeant spoke importantly, "Captain Maxwell left last evening with a detachment to bring in that old Cheyenne, Plenty Coups."

"Good God!" muttered David and started on a run for the gate to the fort, to stop and come quickly back as the seargeant called after him, "The Colonel ain't here, Lieutenant. He's gone over on the Chugwater on a hunt."

"Saddle my black," David ordered sharply. "Get him quick!"

The sergeant saluted and entered the corral on a run.

David turned toward old Sante Fe and saw that he was already throwing his saddle up on a fresh pony. He found himself wondering how the old man could hold his rifle in the crook of his arm and saddle a half-wild pony at the same time. Unconsciously, David's mind went prowling around for other things to think of—anything but the fact that Maxwell had started. Good God! He picked up his saddle and went inside the corral as the sergeant came forward leading the splendid black.

The sergeant was full of information, talking as he held the restive horse for David to saddle. "Captain Maxwell called for thirty volunteers and left here at four o'clock yesterday afternoon. He said he wanted to reach the Indians in the morning and he'd bivouac somewhere last night."

From a plunging pony Sante Fe was listening and he asked anxiously, "Which way'd he go?"

"He went around out on the plains, below the hills," the sergeant answered. "Scout Lawson told him he might have trouble in the hills with the howitzer."

"Lawson!" snarled Sante Fe, contemptuously, then snarled again, "Howitzer!" and turned his pony on a bucking run for the river. As he reached the river David forced the black alongside, splashing a great shower of sunlit drops over the old plainsman. The grim-faced old scout paid no attention to the water.

"We'll have to ride," he muttered.

VI

Maxwell Rides!

ANN awoke very early the morning after Sante Fe and David left the Cheyenne village. The dim light of dawn filled the lodge as she snuggled down under the warm buffalo robes and lay there dreaming. She could hear the Indian village coming to life; people spoke to each other, drowsily; ponies shifted on impatient feet, tired of being picketed all night with little or no grass in reach; a woman spoke sharply to some child; snarling, fighting dogs broke out in a sudden swirl of noise that ceased as quickly as if cut off with a knife: a pony came walking past the tepee and a boy's voice softly crooning the herder's song on his way out to the horse herd.

The old woman came in and put a kettle of buffalo meat beside the fire. It would simmer there all day and whenever anyone was hungry they came in and ate. Really, Ann thought, that is so much more sensible than going hungry waiting for it to be some particular time of the clock. After a little she got up, went down to the stream and washed, then came back, found her wooden bowl and a buffalo horn spoon and dished out a savory chunk of buffalo hump.

All her life Ann was to remember this dreadful day. She stood out in front of the tepee for awhile, soaking in the glorious sunshine. Out through the gap in the hills to the east she could see the vast sweep of the great plains

rolling away under a cloudless sky, remote, mysterious, but warm and friendly. She felt herself a part of them, belonging to them and to the wild free life of the wild things that possessed them. She threw up her hands in a gesture of lithe grace, greeting the sun. The capelike sleeves of the doeskin dress fell back from her round brown arms. With startling clearness there came to her a picture of herself at home in the little town on the Connecticut River. It seemed so long ago, so far off, not belonging to her at all. A young girl mincing down a long street under shady elms to the river to watch the bright flood sweeping by, clutching with prim hands at wide stiff skirts, bending over to peer up the river, and then away down to the last curve, wondering whence the river came and whither it went, slipping past with the silent relentlessness of time itself. She remembered, vividly, her wonder, and the dim longing to follow the river to a strange bright world beyond anything she knew. She thought of David, and Sante Fe and her good friends the Cheyennes. It was a nice world after all.

AN OLD woman that Ann called "The Grandmother" lived in a ragged tepee not far from the lodge of Plenty Coups. Ann went there now. The old woman and her ten-year-old grandson were alone in the world and very poor. Ann had constructed a picture of husband and son killed in the wars and now only the grandson left. But the old woman was so bright, cheery and busy that she liked to visit her and help her with her work. They were poor, the tepee cover old and ragged, not many robes nor cooking utensils, but Ann noticed that when there was any food in the village they had their share. It was not charity —it was a matter of right. If there was anything to eat they all ate and if not—they all starved together and offered sacrifice to the gods.

As she walked along Ann noticed the circle of older warriors, sitting and talking gravely as they had been for days and days. Cut off by ignorance of the language from talking with the people had sharpened her powers of observation. Eyes and thoughts were learning to take the place of speech. It seemed to her the old men were unusually grave this morning.

At the tepee of the grandmother, the boy was looking over the sole pony he owned, an old one, dun colored. The boy was talking earnestly to the horse in a quiet, reassuring voice, apparently quite certain that the horse understood. The old woman greeted Ann with a flood of talk and Ann threw out her hands in protest, laughing in her face. The old woman stopped talking and laughed herself as she realized Ann did not understand her. Then she sobered and began talking again—evidently she simply had to talk.

As the old woman talked on, Ann reflected how little speech mattered after all. She seemed to get on, to know anything of importance and what was going on in the village without a single spoken word that she understood. Sympathy, she reflected, and understanding, a desire to help, had a language of its own that made speech unnecessary.

The Indian boy spoke excitedly and the old woman hurried out of the tepee, Ann after her. The whole aspect of the village had changed. It was as if one had looked away from a picture for a moment and then, on looking back, found it a different color.

People were coming out of the tepees, warriors, women and running children together. From the hill to the north came a rattle of stones and sharp young voices as the pony herd was driven at a run down the rocky slope. Something was up.

"What is it?" Ann asked the grandmother.

The old woman looked excited and broke into a torrent of Cheyenne words that meant nothing to Ann.

THE old men were on their feet now, their robes drawn around them, their dark faces shining in the sun as they looked up at the mounted figure of The Flying Cloud. The Flying Cloud was talking rapidly, trying to keep the thrill of excitement out of his voice, but Ann could sense that the young warrior was thoroughly wrought up. He talked on and on, talking with his hands as well as his voice, signing with swift eager hands at the intent faces of the old men. Once he raised naked arms as though aiming a rifle and then threw up his hands in a great circle. The old warriors looked at each other and exclaimed in deep guttural monosyllables.

"Oh, what is it?" Ann asked again, anxiously, but the old woman was watching The Flying Cloud and paid no attention.

The old warriors were asking questions now, and The Flying Cloud was nodding or shaking his head in answer, the eagle feather on his crown waving brightly. His dark, hawklike face was still, impassive, under the questioning of the old men but his eyes were fiercely eager.

Young men were catching horses, slipping rawhide ropes around their lower jaws and mounting bareback to ride swiftly off the broken hill country to the south. Some carried bows in their hands, with otter skin quivers full of arrows sloping across their backs; some carried their lances and shields with bright streamers standing out in the breeze as they galloped off. Ann hurried over to the lodge of Plenty Coups.

Old Plenty Coups had quit the circle of warriors questioning The Flying Cloud and was seated on the ground in front of his lodge painting his face in strong bands of color. He paid no attention to Ann's excited, "What is it? What's going on?"

A stick was stuck in the ground before the old warrior with a little mirror in a cleft at the top and the old man went on with his work, painting in swift sure strokes. Plenty Coups' wife was taking a gorgeous war bonnet of eagle feathers from its case. She could hardly hold the headdress high enough to keep the feathers from dragging on the ground. Each feather counted a coup—a deed of valor or of public benefit. It was the headdress of an old, brave and successful warrior. The old man stood up, standing a minute to adjust old cramped knees, took the headdress from the woman and adjusted it on his head, looking anxiously into the little mirror the old woman held up to him. The glaring eagle feathers were a perfect frame for the fierce old face. Plenty Coups took his lance and shield and forgot his years as he vaulted quite nimbly onto his pony. The feathered war bonnet swept grandly down across the pony's flank to nearly touch the ground.

Ann turned to again question the old woman but there was no answer. Eyes alight with fierce pride the old woman saw and heard nothing but her warrior riding away.

Then suddenly the old woman touched Ann's arm and pointed to the hill to the south where a naked Indian was riding his pony in swift criss cross. As he turned and circled, the sun glinted on the polished lance head. The old woman shook her head, went back into the tepee and began packing up.

More warriors with new paint on their faces and trailing war bonnets were mounting and riding away. A group of them rode down to the gap in the hills opening on to the great plains. One of this group dismounted and crawled up to the crest of the ridge to the south and looked over. He lay on his stomach, parting the grass ahead of him with his hands, very careful not to show himself to whatever was beyond the ridge. Ann could see him crawl back a little way and make signs with his hands to the men waiting below. Their ponies were restless and kept shifting about, feathers and bright colored streamers waving gaily. The sun

shone on the dull colored bull hide war shields.

THE black figure of Monk came out of nowhere, coming toward Ann, talking to her. There was a strange look in his eyes that Ann could not fathom, though she was sure it was not hostile. He seemed to be begging, pleading for something. "Why won't you speak to me? You must let me talk to you."

"What does he want?" Ann asked herself, annoyed that he should distract her attention from the Indians on the hillside. She paid no attention to him.

"Why can't he leave me alone? He's done enough," she thought.

Monk came up to her, looking around to see if any of the Indians were watching, still talking pleadingly.

Ann refused to look at him but with a movement of impatience and dislike went into the tepee and pulled the flop down behind her. She wished he would go away. When she didn't see him she could forget his disgusting brother and all the sickening details of her journey with the Monks. She found herself again thinking of the corral gates at the fort—a place to hang people. She was nervous, excited, beginning to be worried at what was going on. Again she asked the old wife of Plenty Coups, "What's going on? What is it? Why are you packing up?"

The old woman was stuffing things into a parfleche, mumbling to herself, and paid no attention. Ann sat down, distractedly. Monk wouldn't dare come in the tepee. He was afraid of the Indians. She knew he was afraid.

There came one shrill yell—so high and fierce and wildly defiant it seemed to pass through and through Ann like an electric shock. Her whole body tingled in response to the wild, defiant joy in the shrill yell.

She got up and threw back the entrance flap, stepping outside. Monk was gone—she couldn't see him anywhere. She could see Thunderhawk now, standing by his tepee, resplendent in his gorgeous war bonnet, talking gravely with a group of the older warriors. They were all painted and dressed for war. Thunderhawk's black-and-white pinto pony threw up an impatient head and sent out a cascade of silvery sound from the sleigh bells that hung around his neck. Their delightful tinkling struck Ann as the strangest thing she had ever heard.

The group of Indians down in the gap to the east were part-way up the slope now, opening out into a long line facing down hill. One of the half-wild ponies began dancing and then reared wildly, straight up in the sunlight. The rider leaned nimbly along the pony's side and yanked him down with a quick tug on the rope around his lower jaw.

Then Ann noticed a faint cloud of dust beyond the little ridge, out toward the end where the hill flattened down to meet the plains. Something was coming. She grew taut with expectancy and her heart began to thump oppressively. The village suddenly grew deathly quiet, everyone standing still, silently watching the cloud of dust that grew and floated beyond the ridge. The whole world seemed to have ceased its work and stood expectant, watching for what would come into sight around the end of the ridge.

ANN did not see them appear, she saw only that the gap was filled by a column of blue-clad, mounted men. Her eye caught the sun glint from the polished brass of a little cannon that rolled and heaved along over the uneven ground. They were riding jauntily in a column of twos, a fringed buckskin-clad figure beside the leader. Ann wondered if the scout was Sante Fe. She hoped it was David and Sante Fe. But the leader did not look like David nor the scout like Sante Fe. The leader was too heavy, and he didn't act like David. Why hadn't David come, and good old Sante Fe?

She could see now—the officer was that awful Captain Maxwell. Ann

shrank into herself and then forgot herself, watching the blue column of soldiers coming steadily on. A bright flag rose and fell and shook out folds to the movement of the horses. A little, two-colored banner with figures on it swayed impudently. Bobbing along on wheels came the glinting brass of the howitzer. A "cannon!" Ann thought. "Good Heavens, what have they got a cannon for?"

The soldiers were looking up at the line of mounted Indian warriors on the slope above them, looking and talking lightly to each other. The sun shone on wide yellow gauntlets and yellow stripes down blue legs. Captain Maxwell gave a sharp order and the men ceased talking, straightened and stiffened in their saddles and drew in close together, two and two. A thrill of dread went through Ann as she watched the soldiers and then looked up to the silent, menacing line of warriors on the hillside.

Ann looked around the wide circle of brown, buffalo hide tepees. Women and children were grouped around their lodges, watching and talking in low, anxious voices. The younger warriors were mounted and formed a curved line behind where Thunderhawk and the older men stood impassively awaiting the coming of the soldiers. She thrilled to the gorgeous, barbaric spectacle of the mounted warriors, their hawklike faces all watching, watching, intent, and as fierce as hunting tigers. The slim boyish figure of Young Thunderhawk, rode out of the line and came to a stop just behind his stately father, the sun glinting on the polished head of his lance.

Ann was counting silently—fifteen, fifteen pairs. That made thirty altogether—twenty-eight soldiers and Captain Maxwell and the half-breed scout Lawson. She looked away, down to the gap in the hills and saw the line of mounted warriors from the hillside had closed in behind the troops.

Captain Maxwell raised his hand and the column halted. Maxwell and Lawson, at the head of the column, were close to Thunderhawk. The chief had raised his open hand and spoken some words of greeting but Maxwell paid no attention. The captain was looking around with an air of contemptuous curiosity. It was his first view of an Indian village at home. The older warriors on foot closed in around Thunderhawk and the head of the column and stood there, silent, intent, looking up at the mounted soldiers.

MAXWELL spoke to Lawson and they exchanged a few words. Ann listened intently but could hear nothing and found herself pressing in among the warriors, intensely anxious to hear what was going on. The wife of Plenty Coups came scurrying in and tugged at her arm, muttering "Na, Na," but Ann shook her off, impatiently, not looking at her. A couple of old men turned and scowled at the unseemly clamor of the old woman and she went back to the tepee. Ann could smell the Indians all around her, and the smell of leather and horses, of wood smoke and smouldering camp fires.

Maxwell looked right at Ann and she shrank behind the broad back of an Indian, remembering suddenly she had on no stockings, blushing, furious at herself and hating Maxwell. But Maxwell had not recognized her. With a feeling of relief she remembered her Indian clothing and deeply tanned skin. Probably he would not recognize her at all if she kept quiet. She looked along the column of bronzed troopers sitting stiffly in their saddles and her eyes met those of a bearded sergeant. The sergeant was not making any sign of recognition, just staring at her with his mouth half-open. She became uneasy and edged in again behind an Indian. She was worried—if they did recognize her they might take her back to the fort. She thought the soldiers would not tell but if Maxwell knew—then she didn't know what would happen. She

peeked around the Indian to see if the sergeant was still looking. In a perfectly still face the sergeant elaborately winked one eye. She put her finger to her lips and shook her head. The sergeant gave a quick little nod and turned his eyes to the front. Ann began to think she had better go back to the tepee where there would be no danger of being seen. Then she forgot her timidity in listening to what Maxwell was saying.

Maxwell was talking to the half-breed Crow scout, Lawson. "Tell the old buck I want the man who killed that cow."

"Good Heavens!" Ann thought, "are they still talking about that old cow? Were they crazy, or only silly boys playing at life?"

She looked at the captive eagle on its perch beside Thunderhawk's tepee. Her glance wandered to Thunderhawk and then back to the white-headed war eagle. How alike they were. Even the white feathers on the eagle's haughty head seemed like the war bonnet that framed the chief's aquiline face. She noticed the curious little puckered scars on Thunderhawk's naked breast where the torturing thongs of the sun dance had broken loose from the flesh —and the long scar that came down across his front from one shoulder. It must have cut him wide open.

Lawson was speaking to Thunderhawk, using the Cheyenne language in a contemptuous voice.

Thunderhawk shook his head and spoke briefly. Whatever the words were, they carried to Ann a sense of finality.

Lawson grinned and spoke to Captain Maxwell. "He says he won't."

MAXWELL'S red face flushed and he began swearing, working himself into an excited rage.

Ann remembered he was like that at the fort. When he was arguing, or was crossed in anything, he flushed a deep red, and became angry, excited, acting as if half drunk. She remembered some one had said he never drank. He was certainly acting as if drunk now.

Maxwell broke out at Lawson, "Tell the damned Indian if he don't produce the man I'll take him by force."

Lawson was talking to Thunderhawk again—the half breed Crow talking to his hereditary tribal enemy and feeling quite safe in being contemptuous and insulting.

The Cheyenne chief again shook his head, speaking in grave courteous tones direct to Maxwell, paying no attention to the scout.

Ann looked swiftly around at the warriors. She wondered at the change in them. In the village life they had been friendly, talkative, at times gleefully clamorous, jesting and laughing. Now only their eyes were alive—their faces set in grim immobility, lips drawn tight, as they watched Thunderhawk and Maxwell with dark smoldering eyes.

Then she heard Lawson again, talking to Maxwell. "He says he wont."

The half-breed waited a minute, looking at Maxwell furtively, as though gauging how far he could go. Then he said, "He say get t'ell out a here. He say you big damn fool!"

"Oh, the liar, the liar!" Ann gasped and started to push through the Indians to scream at Maxwell, "He's lying! I know he's lying."

Frantic, she saw Maxwell's rage convulsed face and shouted again. Suddenly Maxwell lunged forward with his whip and slashed Thunderhawk across the face.

SWIFT as light, yet so smoothly graceful was the movement it seemed almost slow, The Young Thunderhawk passed his lance clear through Captain Maxwell. For one brief instant of appalling silence Ann saw the lance head sticking out of Maxwell's back. A thin little trickle of bright blood ran out on the polished steel and gathered in a little globule at the point before it broke and fell.

A screaming, triumphant yell and Ann was knocked down in the rush of yelling warriors. Her last sight of Maxwell was to see him turning a face that seemed curiously cool now and trying to shout an order. Guns roared in her ears, horses reared and kicked and screamed, there was the deep, breathless grunts of stabbing, fighting, killing men; the smell of dust and sweat and horses and then she sickened at the sickly, sweet smell of human blood and she knew it for what it was.

Blinded by the dust, deafened with the roar of rifles and the shrill yells of the Indians, jostled and thrown down again and trampled under moccasined feet, sick with horror yet steadily trying to get away she crawled out of the ruck, got to her feet and ran blindly away. She came to herself to find the wife of Plenty Coups shaking her and motioning furiously for her to help to get the tepee down off the poles and rolled up. Keeping her back to the ghastly roar of the battle, blinded by streaming tears, she went frantically to work helping the old woman take down and pack up and lash things on the travois. Without knowing how, she found herself on horseback and the old woman was screaming and lashing at her pony and pack animals, driving them in headlong flight up the slope.

Suddenly she was conscious that she no longer heard the roar of guns. As her horse ran wildly up the hillside in a milling throng of pack animals, dragging travois, woman, children and dogs, she turned to look back over her shoulder. She could see nothing but Indians and horses—naked Indians yelling and dancing and then in one corner of the surging crowd a sudden rush and the sun gleaming on striking axes.

Out of this crush one lone blue clad figure broke away and started on a stumbling run up the hill. A mounted Indian jumped his pony alongside the fleeing figure, sprang from the pony to the shoulders of the soldier and they went down in a heap. A knife flashed in the sun and a minute later the warrior stood up and with a triumphant yell of savage joy held the bloody scalp up to the sun.

Ann swayed drunkenly and grasped the mane of her running horse with both hands.

VII

And Santa Fe Rides.

LIEUTENANT DAVID DUNHAM and old Sante Fe were searching hopelessly among the slain soldiers on the battlefield, searching for some spark of life. There was none. David was knowing the anguish of youth looking for the first time on the faces of dead friends and the bitterness of the soldier in the face of an utterly wanton sacrifice of men. And the girl? God knows what horrible things had happened to her. It seemed to David more than he could bear. Most of the bodies of the slain had been stripped and they were turning black in the sun. Hordes of obscene flies clustered on raw, scalped heads.

David was afraid to look. Afraid he would stumble on to a long braid of blood soaked hair that was finer than any other hair in the world. So war was like this? Why had not someone told him it was like this? Where now the blaring bands and gay banners of marching soldiers?

The little howitzer was off to one side, upside down, a broken rawhide rope attached to one wheel. Evidently the Indian had started to drag it off. It looked silly now, wheels turned up to the sky like a turtle on its back.

A horse, rear quarters paralyzed from a shot through the back, had its front feet stretched out in front and reached up grinning, horrible teeth in a shriek of agony. Sante Fe shot it.

The appalling deadness of the world. Soldiers, horses, the very landscape, all in the stillness of death.

Sante Fe reloaded his rifle and went on poking about, sometimes clicking his tongue, or muttering and shaking his head. But he had been on too many

Indian battlefields to be greatly concerned.

David ran his tongue over dry lips and croaked the question, "I don't see anything of her?"

"Her!" Sante Fe looked surprised. "Yah, she's safe enough. Wouldn't nothing happened to her 'cept by a accident."

Seeking reassurance David went on, "You think she's all right?"

"Sure," answered Sante Fe, and seemed relieved to find something to talk about. "The village would a pulled out first sign o' trouble and took her along. Ain't no cause to worry about her."

The old scout was poking into a pile of dead, finally giving it up and thoughtfully rubbing the side of his nose with his thumb, saying, casually, "I was kinda hoping we'd find that Monk man here."

AFTER a little Sante Fe went on. "Maxwell must a rode right in here in close order. He was surrounded afore ever the fight started. Ye'd think he'd a had a little more sense."

The old scout was leaning on his rifle, looking around, reconstructing what had happened.

"That circle of stones thar was Thunderhawk's lodge," he said, motioning with his chin. "They come in here, up the valley, in column o' twos and Maxwell rode right up to the tepee. Probably they went to parleying and then Maxwell or that damn Lawson said suthin' or done suthin'. They didn't have no chance atall. This basin was alive with warriors all madder'n hell."

"We must get back and report," said David, moving toward his waiting horse.

Sante Fe came along after him, slowly, saying, "Yah, they know all about it by now."

David whirled around eagerly, demanding, "You think some of them got away?"

Sante Fe shook his head. "No. Nobody got away." He motioned with his chin again, up the slope to a tumbled white body. "That feller come nighest to gittin' away—and he didn't git fur."

"Then how will they know?" David asked, sinking again into despondency.

As they mounted their horses Sante Fe answered, "That bunch of Arapahoes down in the flat below the fort know all about it by now. Injuns allus knows. And them Arapahoes ain't goin' to waste no time telling yer Colonel Holcomb what's happened to his young men." He ended up, sourly, "Yah, they'll git a heap o' real pleasure out of telling him."

On the crest of the hill old Sante Fe pulled up his horse and looked back. Slouched around in the saddle with one hand resting on the horse's rump he looked a long time down at the battlefield and away out over the silent, brooding plains to the east. The bronzed and wrinkled old face grew bleak.

"I come out onto these plains more'n forty years ago," he said sadly, half to himself. "I've hunted and trapped and lived with the Cheyenne and ain't never had no trouble. I've helped 'em in their wars—we've been brothers."

After a long pause filled with aching memories he went on, "They was good days. But they're gone now. Now yer damn emigrants come biling through here, raising hell—and then o' course the soldiers have to come. And now they ain't going to be nothing but war and killings till the Injuns is all run out o' the country. But they ain't no place left now to run 'em to."

The old scout turned in the saddle and picked up the reins with a sigh. "I'm glad I lived when I did," he muttered.

Out of the far distance a dim speck came floating down the sunshine, soared gracefully in a great circle, climbed quickly upward on wildly flapping wings, then, reassured, slid gently down to the feast of the dead. The

buzzards were coming to bury the dead.

AT LARAMIE two troops of Dragoons were under arms, mounted, waiting in ranks on the flat before the fort. To a question from David a sergeant told him all the officers were with Colonel Holcomb. David and Sante Fe hurried in through the gate. Out by the corrals the mules of the pack train were being saddled. From where they dismounted David and Sante Fe could hear the angry voice of Colonel Holcomb.

Inside they found the officers clustered around the walls listening to a colonel who was red-faced, bitter, beside himself.

"And I'll hang every Cheyenne I can lay my hands on," the Colonel was saying.

There was no need to report the battle David found. They knew all about it. It needed only his confirmation to start the colonel off again.

"What do you think, Santa Fe?" the Colonel demanded. "Any chance of catching them at once?"

The old scout shook his head. "Nary a chance. They'll split up all over the plains. Later, when they come together again for the fall hunt, mebbeso you'll find 'em." He shrugged his buckskin shoulders as if he didn't much care.

"What the hell do you mean?" demanded the Colonel. "Mebbeso you'll find 'em," he angrily mimicked Sante Fe. "You're damn right I'll find them and I'll hang Thunderhawk and every last one of his whole band!

"My God," the Colonel went on, "This couldn't have happened at a worse time. These damn emigrants are writing letters and the newspapers back East are caterwauling about the Indians until it makes one sick. The department sticks me out here with not half enough troops to cover the trail. Now I'll have to explain the loss of Maxwell and his detachment. I'll be damn lucky to escape a court martial with the way those damn newspapers will come down on me. And I was right in line for the next brigadier generalship. I can see that going to hell."

The colonel finished with a despairing move of both hands, then brought the officers to their feet by angrily demanding if the pack train was going to take all day to saddle up. Then he began rummaging among the papers on his table, picked out one and handed it to David.

"There you are, Captain Dunham," he said. "Your step came in this morning with the despatches from Leavenworth. You are in command of a troop. Since you have already been on the ground you can take your troop and the pack train and bring in the dead. We will bury them here."

Captain David Dunham saluted and went out, gave brief orders to the pack train and rode out to his troop. As he rode along the ranks he was disposed to feel bitter over his captaincy. If it had only come before—he would have been hilarious with pleasure. Now he thought he was an old man, the buzzards were picking at his dead friends and the woman he loved was away off on the plains with hostile Indians. What good was a promotion now? There was no longer any good in life.

THE soldiers had evidently been told that now he was Captain Dunham and in command of the troop. Bearded faces that had been grim and vindictive thinking of dead comrades now began to break into smiles of welcome. A sergeant started to cheer as Captain Dunham reached the head of the column, but David called them sharply to attention and gave the order to march.

On the ride to the battlefield David's thoughts were in a hopeless turmoil. He bitterly regretted his dislike for Maxwell and would give anything now if he could do some friendly act. Somehow, he seemed partly responsible for

Maxwell's death because he had disliked him. Now Maxwell was dead and he would never see him again. He wondered about death. Wondered if it hurt to die. Wondered how it felt to be dead. Did Maxwell know now what people thought? Perhaps he knew that, now, David liked him.

And the girl. She was his woman, he told himself. And he might never see her again.

And the Cheyennes. His first, vindictive desire for revenge was slipping away. Perhaps it was the childish yammer of the Colonel that was responsible for that. He had come out to Laramie with a very friendy feeling for the Cheyennes. Why, he told himself, it was really to see the Cheyennes that he had come to the post. He asked for this unpopular assignment so that he might live and hunt with them and be friends with them as his Uncle Asa had before him. He had been fascinated with the eaglefaced Thunderhawk and the barbaric splendor of his warriors. And the spontaneous friendship of the young Son of Thunderhawk had warmed his heart—but by God, they couldn't kill his men!

The voice of old Sante Fe broke into David's thoughts, "Yah, a sick cow and a damn lying emigrant—and now look."

Yes, that was true, and David sighed. Why didn't the Colonel kick that damn emigrant out at the beginning? Or sent himself and Sante Fe in place of Maxwell and Lawson? If his captaincy had only come before, he could have demanded it. Too late. But he mustn't think that way about Maxwell. Whatever he had done, Maxwell had paid the full price.

After all—the Cheyennes had right on their side—but they couldn't kill his soldiers. David began to wonder where he stood. He didn't know where he stood. He couldn't hate the Indians. He fastened in relief on the emigrants. Damn the emigrants. They started all the trouble.

And now he would have to lead his troop in search of Thunderhawk and the Cheyennes. Follow them on and on and fight them, until there were no more left. With a shock of surprise he found that he did not want to do that. What was he doing in the Army anyway? The Army was for men who hate Indians and wanted to kill them. He did not. He didn't want to kill anybody. All he wanted was to find the girl, his woman, and hold her in his arms for life. He would quit the Army. Resign. Yes, that was the way out.

SANTE FE was talking, talking to himself aparently, out loud, "Going to hang 'em is he?" He spat with disgust, "Yah, it'll keep him busy doing it."

Then he spoke to David, resentfully, "'Tain't right to hang Injuns. They can't hardly do nothing that deserves hanging."

David looked surprised, a little angry.

"Ye see, Captain Davy," the old scout explained, "Injuns has got souls same as ye think ye have. Only they thinks their souls leaves the body through the mouth. If ye hang 'em the soul can't git out and it stays in the body in eternal torment."

The old man shook his head again.

"No, 'tain't right to hang 'em."

"Do you think you could find her?" David suddenly broke into Sante Fe's mumbling complaint.

"Find who?" And Sante Fe's eyes opened in surprise. Then he grinned. "I thought ye weren't consarned about these emigrant gals."

David resented the jocularity and he resented anyone calling Ann a "gal." He glared hotly at old Sante Fe but the old man merely shrugged as though to say, "I suppose you think no one ought to ever grin again—but I've lived too long and seen too much to but grin at it." Then to David. "Sure I kin find her. But I'm sartin she's safe enough. Howsoever, with war coming 'twould be best to have her in the fort—lessen that Monk may turn up again. May take some hunting but I kin find her."

"We'll start as soon as I can leave the fort," David said.

On the knoll out beyond the fort, in the soft summer twilight, the soldiers buried their dead. The troops formed three sides of a square, the Colonel facing them, prayer book in hand. From his post in front of his troop David could see two bands of Indians behind the Colonel—Ogallallas and Arapahoes, blanket wrapped, impassive, but dark eyes watching in eager interest. Between the groups of Indians was a jumble of ragged, dusty emigrants, the women in mother hubbards and sunbonnets, the men with pants stuffed into sagging boot tops—looking uncertainly at each other and at the orderly array of troops and slowly fumbling to drag ragged hats from frowsy heads.

Away off behind the hills the sun had gone down in a blaze of crimson glory. The evening star shone out red and fiery. The snow peaks to the southwest were still warm and rosy with the last rays of sunlight. They were all there, David thought—all he had looked forward to so eagerly—the soldiers, the frontier fort, the emigrants, the Indians, the endless plains and the great white peaks of snow—all there—and all grouped around a long row of graves.

The lines came stiffly to attention. The Colonel's voice rang out reading the burial service for those who die in battle. The damp earth from the graves looked black against the dry brown of the surface dirt. In sudden roar the hills threw back the crash of the last salute. A bugler stepped out and the soft evening air was filled with the poignant sadness of taps.

ONE morning David asked permission of the Colonel to take Sante Fe and see if he could find Thunderhawk's village.

"That wouldn't do any good—yet," the Colonel answered. "I've sent to Leavenworth asking the Department Commander to let me have all the infantry possible to garrison the fort. Then we can use the Dragoons to clean up that devil Thunderhawk. Until the infantry arrives, it is better to let them get a sense of security. Besides, I've got to send out patrols both ways on the trail and that will keep you busy."

The Colonel seemed to think the matter settled and he turned to the papers on his table, dismissing the matter.

"With the Colonel's permission," David offered, "That girl is still with the Cheyennes. Wouldn't it be better to try and bring her here to the fort?"

"What girl?" asked the Colonel.

"Why," and David was intensely annoyed to find his face growing hot and red. "Why, the girl, Ann Ward, that came in here and then Sante Fe took to Thunderhawk's village."

"Hell!" the Colonel exploded, "I remember now. She went off of her own accord, didn't she? Besides, we've got our hands full enough here now. Hell may break loose along the trail any time and I can't spare a Captain of Dragoons and the chief of scouts. Certainly not for any one girl. You know that yourself."

David tried to be patient. This wasn't just any one girl. This was his woman and all the emigrants on all the trails of the world were not so important.

His face grew red again as he went on, persistent. "I would like to help her, sir."

The Colonel was busy reading and only half noticed what the captain was saying. In a preoccupied voice he asked, "Help her? Oh, yes. Yes, of course. What's she to you, anyway?"

Captain Dunham spoke quite clearly and proudly. "I hope to make her my wife, sir."

The colonel looked up at that, intently, then he began to glare, his rabbit whiskers bristled and he stood up in a rage, blaring out, "Marry her! Good God! Captain David Dunham marry that waif! You must be crazy. What would your father say if I let anything like that hapen to you?" the Colonel roared on.

David was as angry as the Colonel now, but his anger was cold and deadly. "If I married her," he pointed out, "she would not be a waif."

"I said 'No'," the Colonel roared and pounded the desk.

"Very well, sir," and David saluted, whirled on his heel and strode out.

Sante Fe was waiting for him. David couldn't speak at first and had to walk a little way, the old scout eyeing him furtively and waiting patiently for what he had to say.

"The old fool said we'd have to stay here," David finally said.

The old scout spat and grunted. "Who, me? Yah, guess they ain't no strings tied to me. I'll start right away."

"Will you, Sante Fe?" David asked eagerly. "I'm sick with worry about her. But if you go the Colonel will fire you. You will lose your job as chief of scouts."

SANTE FE shrugged his indifference. "Plenty scouts," he answered, "for the work here. Ain't nobody but me kin go among the Cheyennes jest now. I'll git my pony and git out. I'll git some coffee from old Hurley and mebbe I kin git a bladder of pemmican from the Arapahoes."

"How will you find them?" David asked, immensely relieved at Sante Fe's decision. "Have you any idea where they will be?"

The old plainsman thoughtfully thumbed the side of his long nose. "Well now, being the time of year it is, they're pretty sartin to be fixing fur the fall buffalo hunt. Reckon I'll strike out till I run onto the herds and then work north along the edge. I kin tell if they're being hunted."

"It will be dangerous, Sante Fe," and David began to feel he was asking too much.

"Sure," Sante Fe agreed. "Sure it will be. Everything's dangerous around here now. I got to keep an eye skinned for them Ogallallas, and Crows, and Snakes, and mebbeso Blackfeet, but I been doing that fur forty year an' more.

"Fur as the Cheyennes is concerned, I gotta look out some ambitious young lad who don't remember me don't lift my scalp afore I git into the village. Once I git to Thunderhawk, it'll be all right."

He turned to David with a quizzical smile, "While I'm saddling up ye can go write a letter."

"I'll do that," David grinned and hurried off to his quarters.

Sante Fe came dragging his saddle horse to David's quarters, got the letter and shook hands in farewell.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am, Sante Fe," David said earnestly. "I'm a soldier, and I do what I'm told," he said, a little bitterly, "but you can do more for her now than I can anyway."

The old man was chuckling. He seemed to be pleased that he was to be loose again on the open wind-swept plains. From the saddle he grinned quizzically, "Yah, young feller, don't take too much fur granted. I may bring her here and I may take her somewhere else. I'm a little mite in love with her myself."

David grinned back at the buckskin figure on the horse. "All right, Sante Fe," he agreed cheerfully. "Bring her here and we'll fight it out afterward."

Then as he saw the Colonel coming out of the office and didn't want to have to speak to him again he hurriedly shook hands, went back into his quarters and slammed the door.

OLD SANTE FE started his horse on a very slow walk for the gate. The horse apparently couldn't walk slow enough to suit him so he pulled him up and pretended to peer anxiously down at a front foot. This gave him the opportunity to start up again so that his horse came squarely in front of the Colonel.

The Colonel, annoyed, had to stop and wait for the horse to pass. "Where you going, Sante Fe?" he angrily demanded.

"Who? Me?" asked Sante Fe.

"Yes. You."

"Well," and the old scout was quite pleasant. He was thoroughly enjoying himself. "Well, I thought I'd take a little ride."

"Where to?" the Colonel demanded.

"Can't say fur sure," old Sante Fe went on in a gossipy voice. "Off north some'ere. May be gone a week. Mebbeso a month. Why, Colonel," he became more animated and leaned over in the saddle as if imparting a desired secret. "Why, Colonel, I may never git back."

"What the devil do you mean?" the exasperated Colonel demanded. "You have no orders to go out. If you're going off by yourself now you're dismissed."

"Dismissed? Who? Me?" the old man asked in apparently shocked surprise. "Why, I ain't been working for you and your outfit for most a month now. Didn't ye know?" the old man's face was blandly innocent.

"Then get out of this post and stay out!" the now thoroughly enraged Colonel shouted.

"Sure, Colonel, sure," and the old man started his horse at a walk again.

As he rode out the gate he looked back, saw the Colonel standing there looking after him, and the old devil stood up in his stirrups, leaned forward in the saddle and slapped his behind. He rode off snickering.

VIII

Like a Gallows . . .

THE Oregon-California trail was soon in an uproar. Grown contemptuous after the killing of the soldiers by the Cheyennes, the Ogallalla swept down in riotous glee to the eastward of Fort Laramie. They raided the trail along the Platte clear to Grand Island. They were not killing—yet—not vindictive so far,—just amusing themselves, running off stock, looting wagons and scaring the emigrants to death.

One long train of fifty-four wagons was left near Scotts Bluff without a single head of stock—oxen, horses, cows, all disappearing in the gashes in the bluffs to the north of the river, spurred on by a horde of painted warriors whooping in contemptuous derision. This train corraled their wagons, sank the wheels and made a fort, then sent men to Fort Laramie for help. Footsore, hungry, worried, half sick they came straggling into the post demanding impossible things of an already overwrought Colonel.

The Colonel commandeered a string of oxen from a Mormon freight outfit and sent them with an escort of Dragoons to bring in the wagons.

Then the train was marooned at Laramie, with autumn coming on and winter in sight. Men, women and children lounged in and out of the fort, complaining, nagging and worrying. The first mail that started east for Leavenworth had a whole sack of letters, most of them addressed to Congressmen, and the Colonel tore his hair.

Patrols were out riding up and down the trail and David was busy with his troop on the upper Sweetwater, patrolling clear to South Pass on the Continental Divide. He thought often of Sante Fe in his long rides from post to post and wondered if the old man had reached the Cheyenne village in safety, and where was he now, and was the girl with him.

A band of Uncpapas swept across the trail, there was a fight with the grim men of a freight outfit, Indians killed and scalped and then all the horrors of an Indian war broke loose. Orders were sent west to Green River and east to old Fort Kearney to stop all wagons and close the trail and Colonel Holcomb sent frantic appeals for more troops.

ONE afternoon, coming down the Sweetwater with his patrol, David met a wagon train. They told him one wagon had dropped behind but they guessed they'd catch

up. Anyway, they didn't feel like waiting. Anxiously David and his men spurred on down the trail and came to a cloud of black smoke slowly drifting off to the south, to a man and woman shot full of arrows, and a little boy whimpering in the sagebrush.

David took the boy in his arms and gradually got the incoherent story from the weeping little fellow. The wagon had stopped, just for a minute, the boy said, and repeated it over and over as if it was of immense importance. Just for a minute they had stopped and then there were Indians all around them and they killed his father and mother and set fire to the wagon. Then he said they didn't kill his sisters—they carried them off on their horses, and the bearded troopers standing in a ring around the choking lad cursed bitterly.

A Delaware scout pulled an arrow from the dead man, looked at it, shrugged, and said, "Cheyenne."

The captive white girls were brought to the Cheyenne village and Thunderhawk promptly bought them from the captors. He brought them to Plenty Coup's tepee and turned them over to Ann.

As soon as the captive girls understood that Ann was a white woman in spite of her Indian clothes they broke down in a flood of tears and talk and clung to her distractedly. It was a not unusual story—a wagon fallen behind an immigrant train—an empty landscape that filled suddenly with mounted, painted, yelling Indians—burning, killing, scalping, and the wild flight in hilarious glee, taking the girls with them.

A little brother the girls were not sure about. One thought he was killed but the other was sure he hid in the sagebrush and escaped. They had watched the Indians kill and scalp their father and mother. Would they be killed, too? Would they have to stay with the Indians all their lives? Why did Ann stay with the Indians?

When an Indian entered the tepee the little girls shrank back, wide eyed in fear and horror, but Ann mothered them and talked to them, setting them little duties to do, and slowly they lost their heartbreaking air of fear. They soon accepted the presence of kindly old Plenty Coups and his wife. They played with the baby daughter of Thunderhawk, mothering her, and giving her a measure of their thwarted childish love.

THE great fall hunt was on and every day the warriors, under strict discipline and directions, went out to the buffalo herds. Rode out on favorite ponies as naked as themselves, armed only with bows and arrows or a lance.

Day after day Ann bundled the little daughter of Thunderhawk up on her back, took a white girl by each hand and went out to the herds with the Indian women to skin and cut up, and bring in the buffalo. Busy days were come.

Busy at the butchering, Ann was soon indifferent to bloody hands and the smell of fresh meat. As the cape-like sleeves of her doeskin dress fell away from her round arms she noticed how brown they were.

With a gay twist she threw the long braids of fine black hair back over her shoulders and laughed as she thought of the girl she had been, swathed in enormous skirts and carrying an absurd little parasol. How careful she had been to keep the sun from her fine skin. It seemed so funny now.

She remembered a loved romance of a lordly knight and his lily-white lady. She wondered if David dreamed of a lady, lily-white, who moved mincingly through life. Probably he did, she thought. Most men did, she mourned. Grotesquely, she thought she could borrow Plenty Coups' little round bull hide shield and use it for a sunshade. She laughed at the idea, picturing the consternation of the old warrior at any such use being made of his war shield—the war shield that the gods had told him in his dreams how to paint

and decorate and that was his most sacred possession.

Busy days were come, days of cutting the piles and piles of meat into long strips to be dried in the sun, or pounded with fat and pressed into bladders and laid away for the young men on winter hunts or war parties. Days of scraping and beating and smoking the buffalo hides and working them endless hours over poles until they were soft and pliable as woolen.

Days of cheerfulness and animation, and then long evenings with the acrid smell of burning buffalo chips, warriors endlessly recounting and telling of their hunts and the droning rhythm of the drums far into the night.

Every evening now Monk was to be seen preaching. His gaunt figure looming grotesquely against the smoky, glimmering fires as he talked on and on and waved his arms to a circle of politely attentive listeners. They could not understand a word he said, but it was something to do, and if the white man wanted to talk it was only polite to listen. And the fanatical Monk took the courteous attention for interest and acceptance and nightly thanked God that He had at last shown him the road he was to travel and permitted him to bring the mercy of His divine love to these benighted heathen.

To Ann there suddenly came a sense of the stark tragedy of the earnest, lonely figure talking so hopefully to a people who comprehended nothing. In a rush of friendliness she joined a group of Indian girls, who while they sedately listened, were by no means oblivious to the presence of a group of young warriors on the other side of the circle. Ann listened awhile, indifferent, then drifted off into dear dreams of her own, to be brought swiftly back as she realized that Monk had finished his sermon and was talking to her.

I SHALL never bear witness against you," Monk was saying. "I have wrestled long nights with my God, and he has brought me to realize that His harvest here is ripe for the reaper. I shall preach the Word to these awful savages and He has told me plainly that doing so I shall win my brother's soul to paradise. And it may be yours also."

The shirtless figure stood there, his rusty black coat buttoned tightly around his gaunt body, his head half obscured by the drifting smoke of the camp fires. Ann could see him but dimly—and even more dim was her comprehension.

She wanted to protest, "But I am not the one who was wrong," but she dropped her hands listlessly, "What was the use, anyway?" Then she brightened to the thought—"Then I am free! If he doesn't appear against me they can do nothing. I am quite free. Why, I can go wherever I want to, any time."

She thought of the beam over the corral gates at the fort and her morbid picture of herself hanging there. She laughed at that now—nobody would hang there.

Monk was talking to her again, "I wish you well," he said, "and I pray for you always." He stood waiting for a minute, uncertainly, then seemed to dissolve in the smoke and drift away.

The next morning Thunderhawk came to Plenty Coups' tepee, threw back the flap, and, after the morning blessing on Plenty Coups and his household, beckoned Ann to come out. She started out alone and then the chief signed to her to bring the white girls.

The little girls shrank back from the savage panoply of Thunderhawk but Ann reassured them and brought them out into the sunlight. The hawk-faced young warriors, Flying Cloud and Wild Horse were there, mounted, smiling amiably.

Thunderhawk pointed to the two white girls and then to two led horses, saying in English, "Go fort. White squaws go fort. Go soldiers."

Ann understood him at once—that he wanted to send the captive girls to

Fort Laramie with Flying Cloud and Wild Horse.

"Oh, I am glad," she exclaimed.

She explained it to the girls, telling them they were to ride the horses and the two Indians would take them to their friends where the soldiers were. Probably they would find their little brother there. The girls hung back at first, wanted her to go with them, refused to leave her and go away with the two Indians.

Ann made signs that she too would ride a horse to the fort. But Thunderhawk shook his head, pointing to the tepee, saying, "You safe. Sante Fe come, then go."

Ann now wanted very much to go to the fort and persisted in her signs for a horse. Thunderhawk shook his head, patient, but unchanged.

SHE gave it up finally. Probably it was just as well to wait for Sante Fe. He had promised to come as soon as he could. She turned again to persuading the girls to go with the two Indians and they finally consented. They clung to her, tearfully hugging and kissing her and exacting promises that she would come to the fort and see them as soon as the Indians would let her go. They rode away at last, each Indian leading a docile pony with a white girl looking back and waving to Ann. Indians came out of tepees to look at the little cavalcade and shout jokingly to the Flying Cloud and Wild Horse.

On the rise beyond the village the Flying Cloud pulled up his pony and sat there a minute, slouched around with his hand shading his eyes. It was a savage picture Ann thought—the half naked son of the great plains peering down at the home of his people. She wondered if he was looking at her. She gaily waved her hand and the young warrior threw up his arm in a gesture of farewell.

As the feathered heads of the two Indians sank below the hill Ann felt a sudden depression—as if they had gone forever. She pooh-poohed that, told herself it was the girls' going away that made her morbid. She picked up the daughter of Thunderhawk and held her high in the air and shook her until the baby roared with delight. But she was glad she had waved goodbye to the Flying Cloud.

Sante Fe rode into the Cheyenne village just before sunset. It was the same day the captive white girls left for Fort Laramie with the Flying Cloud and Wild Horse. His horse was jaded with long, hard riding, and Sante Fe himself was plainly tired and hungry. After greeting old Plenty Coups and Ann he fell to, hungrily, on the steaming contents of the cooking kettle.

Chunks of buffalo tongue disappeared to the accompaniment of uncouth but satisfied noises as the old scout ate. Once he paused long enough to unloosen his belt, grunt, "Yah, I got a lot of eating to ketch up on."

Old Plenty Coups and his wife watched him with satisfaction. They were glad their guest was hungry and that they had plenty with which to satisfy it.

At last Sante Fe began to show signs of repletion. He sighed resignedly, as if rather sorry he could eat no more, looked uncertainly at the pot a time or two and then shoved it away. He wiped a greasy moustache on shiny, blackened buckskin arms, grunted "Yah" and began feeling for his pipe and tobacco pouch. He lighted the pipe with a coal picked up in calloused fingers, blew whiffs of smoke to the four points of the compass and passed the pipe to Plenty Coups. The old warrior puffed out the sacrificial smoke to his gods and handed it back.

Sante Fe looked at Ann as she sat on her buffalo robes, holding the little daughter of Thunderhawk. The little girl sat quite still, watching Sante Fe out of round black eyes. Sante Fe chuckled.

"Your baby?" he asked.

Ann blushed furiously and snapped, at him, "No! It's not."

Then she laughed. "I almost wish she was. Anyway, I'm going to keep her. Always. She's Thunderhawk's little girl."

"So?" asked Sante Fe, evidently interested. "How come you're riding herd on her?"

"Her mother is dead," Ann replied. Then, resentfully, "The soldiers killed her."

Sante Fe's gray eyes opened wide in surprise and grew fierce with anger. "Yah," he muttered, "that's bad." He looked very gravely at the fire for a long time and then shook his head again, "That's bad," he muttered "Damn bad." Then, musingly, "She was a good woman. One of the best I ever knowed."

Ann began to defend. "Of course," she said, "it must have been an accident. They didn't mean to do it."

Sante Fe nodded. "Sure," he said. "Sure." Then he shrugged and added, "but she's jest as dead as if they meant it."

THE news about Thunderhawk's wife had caused Sante Fe to forget for a minute one of the objects he had in coming to the Cheyenne village, but now he remembered and began to inquire about some captive white girls. He told Ann that it was believed the Cheyennes had taken them.

Ann told him the whole story in a rush of words—the war party that had gone away to the west and their return with the girls and that Thunderhawk had brought them to her. Occasionally Sante Fe broke in with a question to Ann or a swift interrogatory sign to old Plenty Coups and he soon had the whole story of life in the Cheyenne village since the killing of the soldiers. When Ann finished up by telling him the girls had left that morning, that Thunderhawk had sent them to Fort Laramie with The Flying Cloud and Wild Horse he became uneasy. He had her repeat over again that they had really gone with the two young warriors. He seemed particularly interested in the fact that Flying Cloud and Wild Horse had not gone with the war party but had been with Plenty Coups all the time. Sante Fe was so obviously uneasy and worried that Ann caught the infection and became worried herself.

"What's the matter, Sante Fe?" she asked, anxiously, "what's wrong?"

Sante Fe shook his head, uncertainly, "I dunno," he said, "mebbeso it's all right."

"Wasn't it a good thing for Thunderhawk to send the girls to the fort?" she asked.

"Sure," Sante Fe agreed. "Sure. That was a good move." He fidgeted with his knife and belt and peered around into the darkened recesses of the tepee, seeming to prefer not to meet anyone's glance.

"Then what's the matter?" she asked.

"Well," Sante Fe pondered, "I wish the Injuns hadn't gone. I wisht they'd waited till I got here."

He seemed to feel that he was a little at fault himself. "I oughta made it in here afore I did." He spoke defensively, "I spent a lotta time dodging around keepin' out a sight on the way here."

The old plainsman sat and stared at the fire a long time, evidently turning something over in his mind. He began talking half to himself, half to Ann, living in the past. "Thunderhawk had a sister once. Years ago. They called her The Dawn. She were a pretty little thing."

"The Dawn?" asked Ann. Then softly, "How lovely. I'll call the little girl The Dawn."

Sante Fe sighed and went on. "A white man killed her. He didn't mean it neither."

THE old man seemed to have forgotten Ann for the moment and went on talking to himself, "'Pears like most of the trouble in the world warn't meant—but it hurts jest as bad."

Sante Fe began getting to his feet,

tired joints protesting audibly, "Gittin' old, I guess," he muttered and then began talking briskly in Cheyenne to old Plenty Coups. The Indian nodded his head at each question, then got up and went out. Outside Ann heard him shouting a word she knew meant "horses."

Sante Fe was talking to her now. "Well," he said, "you seem to be all right. Ain't no cause to worry have ye?"

Surprised at his air of leave-taking she reassured him as to herself and then asked what he was going to do.

"I gotta travel," he told her. He seemed worried and now, suddenly, he was impatient. "I gotta git to the fort and they ain't no time to lose." As he threw up the entrance flap and went out he added, over his shoulder, "I'll be back soon as I kin. You stay here."

"But wait," Ann called to him and she picked up the little girl and followed him out. It was nearly dark outside, just a golden glow over the western mountains and few stars twinkling high up in the east.

"Why are you going now?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

A young boy rode up leading a fresh pony and Sante Fe began saddling it, hurriedly. The Indian pony sagged back on all four legs and snorted as Sante Fe forced the Spanish bit between its unaccustomed jaws.

Sante Fe talked as he worked, impatiently, "I gotta git to the fort quick as I kin. Probably I'm too late anyway."

"I'm going too," Ann suddenly announced. She didn't know how or why she had come to that decision but she knew she was going. She set the little girl down on its feet, picked up the army saddle she used and motioned to the Indian boy to get off the pony he was riding. The boy looked surprised, looked at Plenty Coups and then back at her. Then he slid off the pony.

She went to work saddling up. She could hear Sante Fe protesting, but she was too busy to answer.

"You can't," Sante Fe was saying, "I gotta travel. Jest touch a few high spots on the trail."

"Fiddlesticks," she told him. "I ride every day. I can ride just as fast as a pony can travel."

On that long, hard ride, anxiety and dread began to ride Ann's shoulder like a living thing. At least, she thought, I shall see David. She let the thought of David fill her heart. Then she woke up with a jerk and looked around, wondering. It was broad daylight. She must have slept she told herself. How could she?

Dread came back to her. What was it Sante Fe feared? But she knew what he feared. She had known it all night and had resolutely thrust it aside. It was too monstrous. Such things couldn't happen. Men couldn't do such things.

"We're most there now," Sante Fe mumbled back over his shoulder.

THEY were in the hills now, riding down a narrow valley. Bald outcrops of rock on either hand and a wide white game trail under foot. A trail left by buffalo and elk, generation after generation of them, streaming down out of the hills to drink at the waters of the Platte.

The valley twisted and then opened out and disappeared. They were on a level flat, in warm sunshine, and the river sparkled just before them. They couldn't see the fort from there. She knew it was down river, to the left a little. Where they would cross the river would be opposite the corral. She didn't want to cross. Suddenly, she dreaded horribly to cross the river and go upon the high bank beyond.

Sante Fe's pony had splashed eagerly into the river and was drinking. The old plainsman sat there, slumped down in his saddle, dejected. He seemed loath to start again. Two or three times he pulled up his pony's head, muttering, "That's plenty for now," but the girl sat there, staring gloomily across

the river. The pony fought for his head and stumbled around on slippery stones, sending up a cascade of flashing drops.

Sante Fe shook his head and sighed. Hope and life seemed to go out with the sigh. He kicked his pony and splashed on across the river. Ann's pony followed along blindly as he had been doing all night. They came to the other bank and the water dropped from the tired ponies to make black spots on dusty earth.

A bunch of mules were huddled in the far corner of the corral. Blanketed Arapahoe Indians were standing off to one side of the gate. Ann saw their faces and then their impassive, opaque eyes fastened on her as they rode forward. The eyes of the Indians slowly shifted to stare up at the corral gate, then they looked away.

Ann thought she was dying. She gave a sobbing gasp of horror, "Oh! Oh!" and half screamed words she had heard the freighters use, "Oh, God damn their souls to hell!"

Twisting slowly in the bright sunlight of the early morning, hung by the neck from the beam over the corral gate, were the dead bodies of Wild Horse and The Flying Cloud.

IX

WRACKED with choking sobs Ann was lashing her tired pony back up the trail they had come down only a few minutes before. She hated soldiers. She hated David. Oh, how could men do such things—or stand by and see them done? She would never go to that awful fort.

Sante Fe's voice stopped her and she waited for him. She shrank from the murderous glare in the old scout's eyes, and then she saw he was not looking at her—didn't see her at all. He stopped his pony and she heard him muttering, cursing the army, and the emigrants and all the white people in the world. After awhile he looked at her, asking, dully.

"Where ye going?"

"I'm going back to the Indians," she told him. "I won't go to that fort."

Sante Fe shrugged his shoulders. He seemed to feel it didn't matter where anyone went.

"It's the emigrants," he muttered. "They brought all the trouble to the country."

Finally he noticed Ann again, "Where did ye say ye were goin'?" he asked.

"I'm going back to the Cheyennes," she told him again. "I'll never go to that fort."

Sante Fe shrugged his shoulders again, then listlessly picked up his reins. He ignored what she had just said and turned his pony back down the trail. "We better go along in to the fort," he said.

"I won't," she answered. And kicked her pony into a tired walk up the trail.

Sante Fe sat and stared after her for a while, then shook his head as if it was all beyond his understanding. He got his reluctant pony into a trot and soon caught up with her but offered no more advice until nearly noon.

At the entrance of a little side gully he spoke to her again. "We best lay up here till dark," he said. "The ponies got to rest and git a bite o' grass. Besides, I ain't easy, wandering around here in daylight, this away." After a little he said, "I got them Arapahoes to take the bodies home."

THE sun was high in the heavens the next day as Ann and Sante Fe came up on the last rise and looked down at the brown tepees of the Cheyennes. Ann remembered it was on this rise that The Flying Cloud had stopped and taken his last look at the home of his people. She wondered if he had known. She was glad she had waved goodbye to him.

Ann spoke for the first time that morning. "What will they do?" she asked.

"Yah," Sante Fe grunted. "Somebody'll have to pay. Hell of it is them

as what done it probably won't be the ones to pay."

They rode on down the grassy slope. Dogs came out to sniff and yap at their approach. A few Indians came out of tepees and stood motionless, looking at them. No one waved a friendly greeting.

In a little gully behind the first tepee lay the naked body of Monk, throat cut, scalped, and thrown out to rot.

Ann felt that she was beyond all further shock. She was sorry for Monk, that was all.

The old father of The Flying Cloud was sitting cross-legged in front of his lodge as they rode past. He was lacing a fresh scalp in a hoop to dry. He looked up at them as they passed. Ann shrank in fright at the malignant hatred in the old man's eyes.

Sante Fe's shrug seemed to say, "You see—somebody had to pay."

The Indians took old lodge poles and built a burial scaffold on the summit of the little ridge south of the village. Wrapped in their rawhide casements the bodies of Wild Horse and The Flying Cloud were borne past Ann as she stood in front of Plenty Coups' tepee. A dejected and sorrowing throng streamed past, the women softly singing their songs for the dead, breaking out at times in a wild wailing that went to the heart. Wet eyed, she watched the cortege climbing up the slope, the bodies of the young warriors held high on the shoulders of their comrades. She couldn't bear to follow them—it would seem like a ghastly intrusion for any white to be there.

She could hear the deep tones of Thunderhawk talking to his people on the hilltop. The deep voice was softened by the distance and came down to her in waves of infinite sadness.

She turned to go into the tepee and then, just as it had happened before, David stood there beside her, looking at her very gravely. Her heart leaped and sang. She wanted him to take her in his arms and comfort her, even as she had the little daughter of Thunderhawk. Instead, to her consternation, she found herself talking coolly, almost contemptuously, "You are a little late," she told him, "the funeral is nearly over." Then she fled into the tepee.

SEATED on the buffalo robes she wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked in agony, "Oh, why, why did she talk that way to him when all she wanted in the world was to be taken into his arms?" The little girl came and leaned against her, then bent over so the wide black eyes could look up into her face, and then began to whimper. Ann rocked her in her arms and tried to smile in reassurance.

All the time she was listening intently, hoping David would come into the tepee but she heard nothing. Oh why, she asked herself again, why did she talk that way to him? She was so very miserable she had to hurt someone, she supposed, but why David? In quick panic at the silence she felt sure he had gone. Perhaps he had gone for good. Perhaps she would never see him again.

She hurried to the entrance and threw up the flap. The Son of Thunderhawk was shaking hands with David. They were talking in Cheyenne, looking at each other with interest, smiling at each other in a friendly way. Why, Ann thought, it is just as if nothing had happened. Young Thunderhawk motioned to David to go with him and they walked off, arm in arm toward the lodge of Thunderhawk. Ann, consoled a little, followed them with her eyes until they vanished under the door curtain of the chief's lodge.

Tepee covers began sliding down off the poles and the ponies were coming in. The wife of Plenty Coups came and signed for Ann to help pack up—the village was moving. Wondering at that, she worked listlessly. She thought there would be four days of ceremonies for the dead, but it seemed they were going right away. She saw Sante Fe, standing leaning on his rifle and went to him, asking, "What are

they doing? Don't they keep a fire four nights for them?"

Sante Fe shrugged. "What's the use? The spirits of The Flying Cloud and Wild Horse can't quit their hanged bodies. They stays here always and the Injuns is afraid of 'em."

Ann became fiercely angry. "Good God!" she said. It was not enough that the whites had killed the young men—but they had turned their spirits into something malignant, to be feared and avoided by their own people.

Then suddenly she was thinking of David, and yearning for him. "Where is he?" she asked.

"Who?" asked the surprised Sante Fe.

"David."

"He's gone back," Sante Fe answered. "He had to git right back."

"But won't they do something to him?" she asked, fearful.

"Not now," said Sante Fe. "They's cooled off some. In course," he went on, "if we'd been here when the bodies was brought in I doubt even Thunderhawk hisself could a saved even us. But David's all right. Them Delaware scouts came out with him and the Son of Thunderhawk is riding back with him, most to the fort."

So he was gone, she thought, gone, and probably she never would see him. The wife of Plenty Coups called, impatiently, and Ann went to help with the packing. The village soon moved, streaming away to the east to be swallowed up in the empty distance of the great plains.

IN THE new location of the village life went on as before. Hunters went out and came in loaded down with elk, or deer or antelope—or they returned empty handed. Scouting parties went out and came back, but Ann saw no indication of their having been in battle. Once a band of the young warriors of the Bow String Society went away north and were gone for days. Ann was worried lest there be more trouble with the whites but they came back driving a band of horses. They were very much pleased with themselves.

"They lifted 'em from the Crows," chuckled old Sante Fe, apparently as proud of it as the Indians were.

Often, in the evening, Thunderhawk came to the tepee and sat a long time with his little daughter in his arms, talking to her. His grave, aquiline face would soften into an amused smile as he talked and joked with his little daughter. Other times he talked with a gentle gravity, admonishing, the little girl looking up at him with wide unwinking eyes, occasionally nodding her head as her father touched on something that reached her understanding.

"What was he saying?" Ann asked.

"He was telling her she was a Cheyenne and the daughter of Thunderhawk," Sante Fe answered. "He was telling her she must larn the ways and the talk of the whites and she'll be a great help to her people. But she mustn't never forget she's a Cheyenne and the daughter of Thunderhawk."

After a minute Sante Fe grumbled, "I don't like it."

"Don't like what?" Ann asked.

But the old scout sat staring at the fire, shaking his head at his own thought, not listening to Ann.

Ann insisted, "You don't like what, Sante Fe?"

Sante Fe roused himself to answer, shaking his head gloomily. "I don't like what's going on. I don't savvy it none. Thunderhawk's talking to the people. He's telling 'em of the numbers and power of the whites. Ye know he was East once, went to Washington with a lot of other chiefs, and ain't forgot nothing he saw. And he's talked a lot with them Delaware scouts at the fort. He knows what's happened to their people. I cain't see what he's got on his mind. But suthin' is going to happen. Suthin' I ain't figuring on," he ended gloomily.

"Oh dear," Ann sighed. "What do you mean? Will there be more trouble?"

"In course," moodily from Sante Fe.

THE next day Ann paid particular attention to the circle of older warriors sitting all day long talking, smoking, talking. She noticed, in the afternoon, Thunderhawk arose and made a long, impressive address. The tall, sinewy figure was naked from the waist up except for the gleaming copper arm bands, the necklace of grizzly claws and one eagle feather slanting forward across his head. He began speaking slowly and evenly, stopping for little pauses between the sentences, giving his audience time to consider each statement. The older warriors, seated in the circle on the ground, listened gravely but at first were inclined to glance at each other, a bit skeptically, as though asking "Is this true?" Some of the young warriors, standing behind their elders, gave open expressions of disbelief, even anger, at what the chief was saying.

As Thunderhawk went on his tones grew louder, deeper and surer and seemed to carry conviction to the people. The old men began nodding to each other and the young men lost their aggressiveness. An air of sadness came over the people. The chief was talking gently now, pointing upward and often making the sign for the Lord of Life. Women had crept softly up to the outer edge of the circle and were hanging on Thunderhawk's words. One of them suddenly broke into the plaintive wail for the dead and was fiercely checked by an old warrior.

Thunderhawk called a name and the assembly opened for a minute to let someone through and Ann could see that Young Thunderhawk stood beside his father. The chief had a hand on the boy's shoulder. He seemed to be presenting his son to the people. When the chief finished speaking the warriors sprang to their feet, threw up their hands and screamed wild yells of acceptance. The wild screaming went on until Ann could no longer stand it and she covered her ears.

The assembly broke up and followed Thunderhawk to his tepee. A band of horses was driven in. Ann knew them to be the chief's and she followed them, scrambling in through the throng, anxiously searching for Sante Fe. What was going on? What was it? She must find Sante Fe and ask him. Then she noticed that Thunderhawk was giving things away. A pony to this warrior and another to that one, weapons, clothes, household utensils to others. All the accumulation of a wealthy Indian chief were brought in and distributed among the people. At length the chief had nothing left but his black and white pinto pony, his lance and shield and the gorgeous war bonnet of eagle feathers. But the ejaculations of delight over the presents were not enough to lighten the gloom of the people over what was taking place.

Ann was becoming intensely anxious. Then she ran into old Sante Fe, unexpectedly. He was standing by himself, leaning on his rifle, his face gloomy and forbidding. "What is it?" she asked. "Why is he giving his things away?"

"Yah," the old scout grunted. "He ain't going to need 'em no more." Then he turned his back on her and stalked off.

SANTE FE was plainly avoiding her. Something was going on that worried him and that he evidently did not want to talk about. This made Ann doubly anxious and she determined to get hold of him and make him tell her what was going on. Besides, she must tell him she was going to the fort. She must get to the fort.

In the dusk of evening, fires were lighted and the people gathered around them. There were none of the usual gay jokes and laughter. They seemed subdued, mournful, waiting for some unhappy thing to happen. Thunderhawk came out of the gloom and stood very still and straight in the firelight. The flickering light from the flames magnified his height until he seemed

a giant. With aquiline face raised to the stars, as if addressing the Lord of Life, he began a deep throated chant.

From somewhere in the background came the low rhythmic throb of a tom-tom. The song of Thunderhawk was low and plaintive at first. It seemed a mournful pleading, then gathered in strength, rising and falling and at last bursting out into exultant triumph. After a pause the chief would begin again, low and sad, with the sobbing notes of the drum running through it.

Ann was sitting with her back against one of the lodge poles, the buffalo robe wrapped around herself and the little girl against the chill of the autumn night. The baby sat with her chubby face above the robe, watching her father. The light of the fires flickered in her wide black eyes. Ann wondered what it meant. Why had Thunderhawk given away his possessions and now why was he singing, alone, in the night? She wondered if it was to be a war party led by the great chief himself. Probably that was it. The soldiers had hung The Flying Cloud and Wild Horse in revenge. Taken and hanged them when they came to the fort on an errand of peace and mercy. Now the Cheyennes would take revenge for that. Then more soldiers would come and kill more Cheyennes. Dear God, would it never end?

But the song of Thunderhawk did not sound like a war song. There were none of the wild, exciting yells, the working up of battle frenzy—only a mournful sadness, a pleading, that changed at the end into an exultant cry of something accomplished. It sounded more like a farewell than a war song.

Then Sante Fe came and squatted on his heels beside Ann, saying, "We're going in to the fort first thing in the morning."

SHE was relieved, and glad, and she thought of David. She hugged the little girl closer to her and smiled. "We'll be ready," she said.

Then she was appalled to hear Sante Fe saying, "Thunderhawk is singing his death song."

"What do you mean—his death song?"

Sante Fe shrugged, repeating, "He's singing his death song."

"But what do you mean, Sante Fe? Why is he singing his death song?"

Sante Fe spoke bitterly. "He's going in to the fort. Going to give himself up to the soldiers."

Ann stared at him. Then "Oh!" she gasped, "Oh! He mustn't. They'll hang him."

"More'n likely," Sante Fe muttered.

"But why?' she asked, "Why does he do it?"

"It's a sacrifice," Sante Fe answered. "He thinks his gods is angry. He knows the power of the whites. He knows the soldiers will come, more'n more of 'em. He thinks if he goes in and gives hisself up it'll satisfy the gods and the soldiers'll leave his people alone."

"But Sante Fe," she protested, "They will kill him. And it won't do a bit of good. You must stop him."

Sante Fe merely shrugged, hopelessly, watching and listening to the song of Thunderhawk.

Ann clutched his arm and shook it desperately, "But his people? Can't they stop him? They must stop him."

Sante Fe shook his head. "They won't stop him. Not for worlds. Can't ye see—it's jest the hero sort of thing that takes hold of 'em. He's a great chief—and now he's bigger than ever. It's like I told ye afore, there has always been a Thunderhawk—the first Thunderhawk was a god—and now this Thunderhawk will be a god. They'll tell it to the children fur a thousand years."

The old plainsman was silent for a little time, then he sighed and muttered, sadly, "But there won't be no children to tell it to."

Ann was thrilled at the grandeur of the sacrifice, and appalled at the futility.

"But Sante Fe," she pleaded, "it

won't do any good. It may for this time, but no more. You must stop him."

Sante Fe snarled at her, "Yah. He can't be stopped I tell ye," and got to his feet and walked off.

Ann held the little girl very tightly to her breast in a new rush of affection and pity. The baby would be fatherless as well as motherless. She must try and keep her from growing up with a feeling of bitter hatred for the whites. But how could the girl feel any other way, when she became old enough to understand?

Through Ann's tear-dimmed eyes the firelight and the stately figure of Thunderhawk dimmed and dissolved. Only the solemn song and the savage monotone of the tomtom was real. It was magnificent, she told herself, but so utterly futile. She clenched her fists and muttered, tensely, "They shan't do it. They shan't." The baby thought it was all play for her amusement and giggled happily.

THEY traveled two days toward the southwest. Two nights they hid their little fire under the steep bank of some unnamed stream. Young Thunderhawk was with them the first day. That night the two Indians sat all night long by the fire, talking softly. From her bed of buffalo robes Ann could see them as she woke occasionally from uneasy sleep. She could see the grave aquiline face of the chief and the eager hawklike face of his son as they faced each other across the little fire. Sometimes the father spoke lightly, almost jovially, but the look of despair never left the boy's face. When Ann awoke in the morning the Son of Thunderhawk was gone—gone back to his people—gone to try to fill the place of his great father.

The second night Thunderhawk held his little daughter, playing with her and talking jokingly far into the night. At last he brought the sleepy but protesting girl and gave her to Ann.

Then for the first time since they had left the village she heard Sante Fe speaking. For two days and a night he had not uttered a word though he had shown in every act and glance his bitter disapproval of what they were doing. Now he suddenly appeared by the fire, standing upright, facing Thunderhawk and broke out into a torrent of angry Cheyenne. The chief listened gravely but merely shook his head. He even smiled a little, tolerantly. Then Sante Fe began arguing, signing and talking, talking on and on to the impassive Indian. At length he fell to pleading, but Thunderhawk answered in a few quiet words that, even to the uncomprehending Ann, carried conviction. Santa Fe gave up.

"What were you saying?" Ann asked.

"I was a telling him not to," Sante Fe answered. He seemed to have lost his anger—was now only sad and resigned. He went on, "I asked him why didn't he stay with his people, git him a new wife, and begin life all over again."

"What did he say?" Ann asked.

Sante Fe shrugged. "He said, 'the eagle mates but once'."

DOWN a narrow, crooked valley, winding and turning and then around a last headland, and the river flashed in the sun, and beyond a bright flag waved and snapped above the walls of Fort Laramie. Like a blow in the face there came to Ann the shrill laughter and raucous shouts from an emigrant train camped on the flat across the river. They splashed through the water and climbed the other bank, skirting around the emigrant camp.

Men, women and children came trooping out from between the wagons to look at them. The emigrants called to each other and talked and laughed and made comments as if the people they were discussing could not hear them. A man shouted "That's that devil, Thunderhawk, the Cheyenne," and they yelled curses at him. Another

said, "Look at that old man," pointing at Sante Fe, "He must be one of them white renegades. They're worse'n Injuns."

Another said, "That's the Injun's squaw and brat. Look at 'em, damn 'em!"

Another shouted, "Hell! She ain't no Injun! She's a white gal," and the man grabbed Ann's bridle rein, peering up at her from a hairy, dirty face.

"Hey, gal," he asked, "Be you a captive?"

Ann kicked at the man, viciously, and would have spat in his face but Sante Fe edged in between and dropped the full weight of his rifle barrel on the man's arm.

"Aouw!" the man yelled stumbling back. An angry murmur came from the crowd, the growling of an obscene beast and they cursed and jeered Thunderhawk and those with him.

Dear God, Ann thought, was it not enough that he should go to his death? Must he also be dragged through this degradation? Then she saw the chief's face — impassive, indifferent, serene, and she was comforted a little.

They were going through the shadowy archway of the gate to the fort. A sentry was waving and grinning a welcome. Sante Fe was off his horse. He angrily kicked open the door of the orderly room and then they were in the room looking at David.

David had looked up from his papers and now he just sat and stared at the little group by the door. Then he sprang to his feet, laughing and talking and shaking hands, first with one and then the other, and then all over again.

But grim Sante Fe swore and rasped out, "Well, here he is. He's giving hisself up."

Then Ann shook a clenched fist in David's face, protesting, "But you shan't do it. You shan't."

"Do what?" and David sensed the tenseness of the group and stepped back, surprised. "Do what?" he asked again.

"You shall not hang him!" Ann cried.

"Hang him?" David asked, looking uncertainly from one to the other. Then his eyes flashed understanding and he said, "Good God! And you've ridden in here thinking he was coming to his death!"

Then he grinned, happily, "Don't worry. There will be no hanging."

THE words tumbled over themselves as he hastened to tell them. He told them Colonel Holcomb had been relieved; that only one troop was at the fort now and he, David, was in command; and that the Department Commander, General Bogart, was on his way out from Leavenworth with a column of troops.

"Yah! Bogart!" Sante Fe shouted, pleased. "I know him. Knowed him in Mexico. He's a just man and he savvys Injuns."

"Yes," David broke in, anxious to tell all his news and relieve their anxiety. "And I have a dispatch from the General to get word to Thunderhawk and ask him to come in for a council. He guarantees a safe conduct and he can be trusted. It's all right," David urged, and again, "It's all right, I tell you."

Sante Fe fairly radiated delight as he signed and talked to Thunderhawk. When he had finished the chief smiled and signed, "I will wait." To David he spoke, in Cheyenne, "I will wait here and talk with the white chief. Perhaps we can bring peace to all our people."

Ann stood and stared. She felt dreadfully let down and thought for a minute she would faint. She had been living so long in a mental state of fear and worry and hero worship, and now, suddenly, it was all over. So that too was like the wolf that slid away.

She half stumbled to a bench and sat down, collapsed. "Oh," she said, staring at the three men, and wanted to cry.

ONE morning old Sante Fe dragged his rifle into the Hurley quarters and told her. "The comanding officer wants to see ye."

The commanding officer? Now what? Ann went across the little parade ground, wondering. Was that old trouble over the Monk family to be brought up again? She had put that away, forgotten it, she thought. And now here it was and all to be gone through with again. She knocked on the door and, at the brisk "Come in," pulled the latch string and went in.

The commanding officer! she thought. Why, it was only David. She wanted to laugh but instead became very prim and formal. "You wished to see me, Captain Dunham?"

"If you will be so good," David said. "Will you sit down?" and he pulled a bench around to face the fire crackling in the chimney. He spoke to her, quite formally, "Monk is dead and there is no one to bring up that trouble. So you are quite free to go at any time."

Free, she thought. Go? Go where? She didn't want to go. She wanted to stay here. Couldn't he see that? Or didn't he care?

She asked, "Sante Fe said you were going to leave the army?"

"Yes," he answered. "After things have quieted down I shall resign."

"Why?" she asked.

He hesitated a little, as if loath to open his mind and display his motives. Though they seemed good to him, they might seem ridiculous to another. "Well," he said, "It's this way. This trouble will blow over—but there will be more. With the white people coming through here in ever-increasing numbers it is simply a question of time until there is more trouble with the Indians. There will be war. I suppose someone will have to fight them but I don't have to."

She was looking at the fire, nodding her head, as if she understood and agreed.

Encouraged, he went on, "And it's still worse for me—you see, the Son of Thunderhawk has taken me for his blood brother. It is really a great honor and I appreciate it but you see where it puts me. I could go into battle after battle with them and they would never harm me. I can't do that."

The room was still for a long time then Ann asked, "You like them?"

"Yes," he said. "More than I can tell you."

AFTER a while she began to shake her head, a little doubtfully, as if uncertain as to where her thoughts were leading. Then she said, thoughtfully, "No," then decidedly, "No. You can't do that."

"I knew you would see it," he said.

"But I meant you can't resign. Can't go away and leave them."

David looked astonished. "Why can't I?"

"Don't you see?" she explained. "If you don't stay, others will come. Men like Maxwell and Holcomb. Men who neither know nor care. You will have to stay because you like them. Stay and, if it comes, fight them—just because you are their friend. And there will be so much less of that if they have a friend here. Don't you see?" she asked, turning to look at him, her wide gray eyes alight with interest.

"Of course," she went on, her look changing to one of sadness. "It will be hard. At times it will be bitterly hard."

David was walking around the room, roaming about as if he had forgotten her. Then he came and stood behind her and her heart skipped a beat and drummed in her ears. David was talking, half choking, but at last she heard him say, "Would you stay and help me?"

And then at last she was in his arms, stroking lean brown cheeks with her finger tips and murmuring, "Ah, David, David, David."

After a long time she said, "But we are going to keep the Dawn. She will grow up and live with us always."

"Of course," he smiled. "Thunderhawk has been talking to me about her. He wants her to learn the ways of the whites. But I better warn you—she will go back to her people some time."

THE MASTER THRILLER NOVELS

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Vincent Starrett

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